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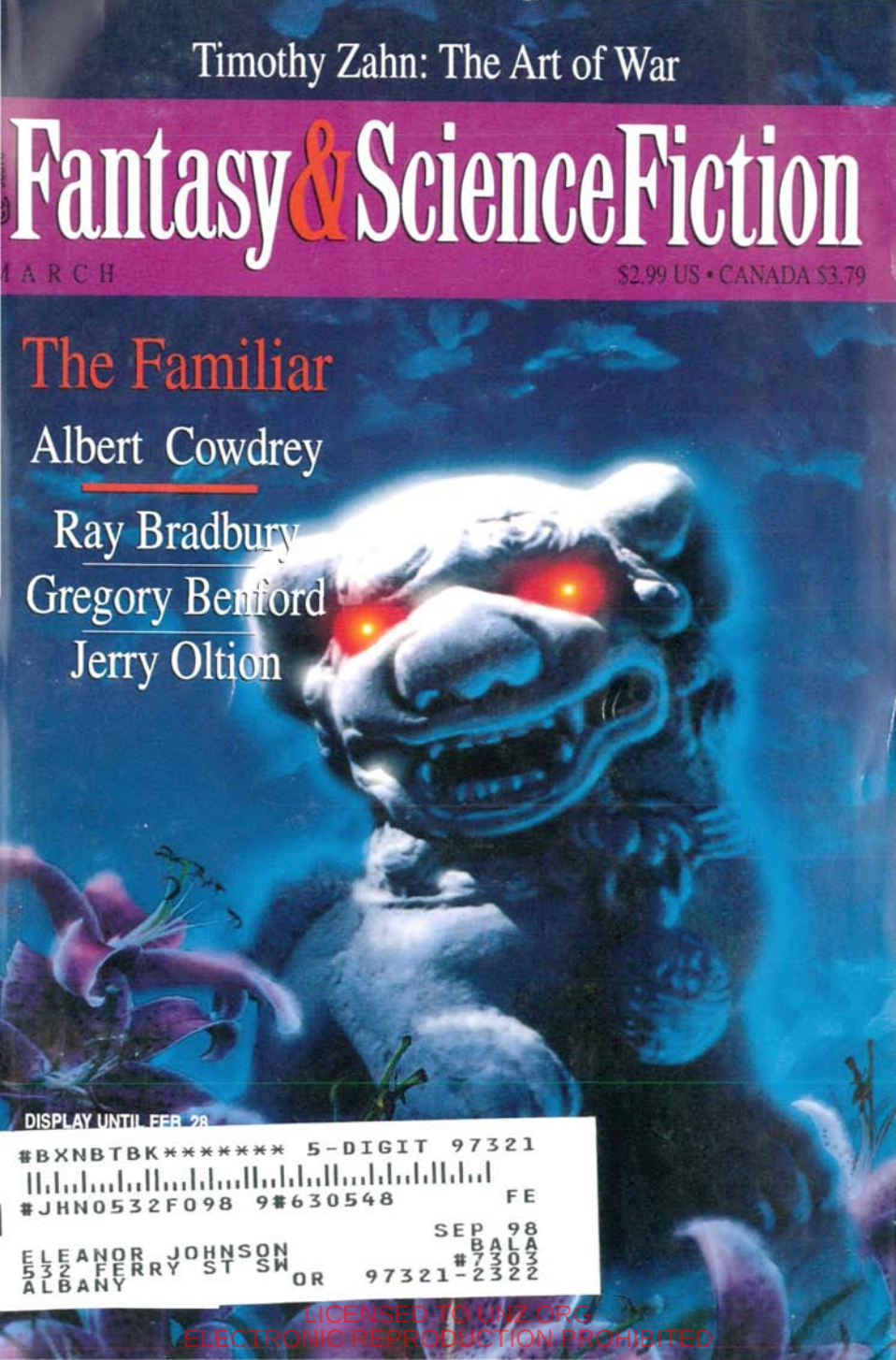

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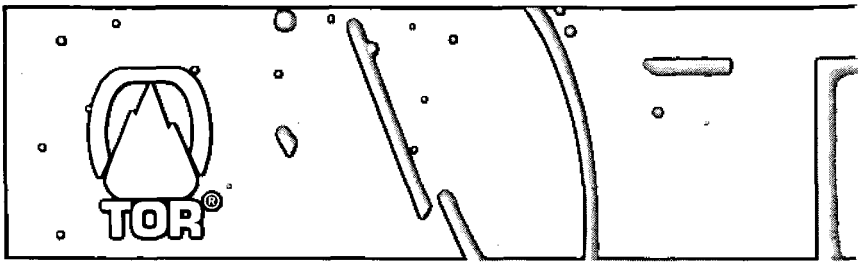

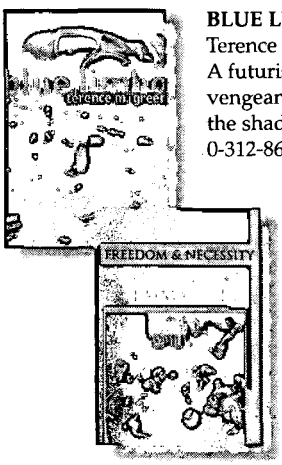

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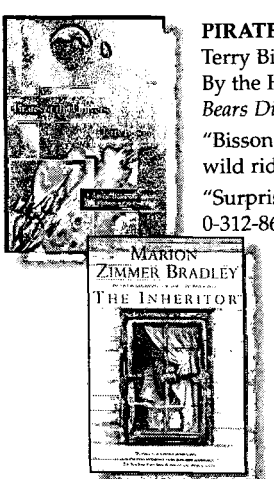

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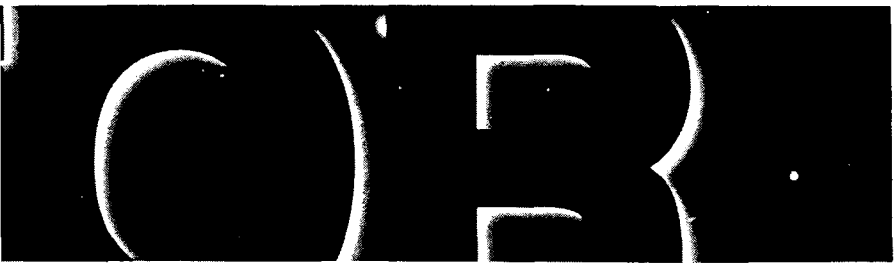

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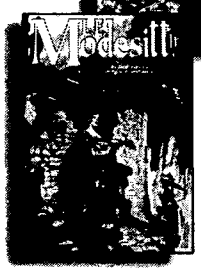

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE SUCCESS of *Independence Day* and *The X-Files*, combined with the relative cheapness of computer-generated special effects, has led to Hollywood's rediscovery of science fiction. Television talk shows now do programs on "sci-fi." Screenwriters are selling pilots that have languished for years, and at least a dozen producers have called me (as well as others in publishing) searching for the next sf property. The interest, both predictable and gratifying, means that science fiction has finally — at least in the media — come into its own.

While all of this was beginning, I attended Worldcon, the largest science fiction convention, held in Anaheim. There I met a few more producers, and talked with a number of fans who liked this magazine, Hugo-nominated novels, and *Star Trek*. I also had two of the most shocking and disheartening experiences on panels that I have ever had.

Two different New York book editors on two different panels said that "the audience is style-deaf." Taken in context, what those editors were saying was that readers don't know what's good, and good books must be forced on them. These good books are "literature" written by stylists. The way something is being said, these editors implied, is as important or more important than storyline, than fresh ideas, than anything else. These "good" books do not sell in large numbers, the reasoning goes, because the audience is ignorant. Readers would rather read "pap" than something intellectually stimulating.

I find it shocking that this sentiment exists, and that it exists among science fiction book editors, among people who should work in collaboration with the book-buying public, not hold it in contempt. Yes, book buyers read things that garner no respect from the arbiters of taste, books like *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Jurassic Park*. But book buyers have also been

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known to read Umberto Eco, Laura Esquival, and Jacquelyn Mitchard in large numbers. Style deaf? I don't think so.

I think criticizing the readership for the fact that a book fails to sell is a way of avoiding responsibility. Books don't sell for a large number of reasons, some to do with publisher errors (like poor covers or lack of promotion), some to do with editor errors (incorrectly judging a book's potential or failing to ask for needed revisions), and some to do with writer errors (refusing to do the revisions or taking too long to craft a phrase while ignoring narrative flow). Yes, sometimes readers pass on a good book, but rarely do they do so because the readers are style-deaf. Often they pass on a "good" book because what an arrogant editor considers to be good isn't.

For the last three decades, the arbiters of taste in science fiction have followed the lead of the mainstream literary publishing industry. When that industry embraced modernist literature — literature with little or no narrative, literature that attempted to capture "real life" in beautiful prose — the industry turned its back on storytelling. Science fiction, in attempt to gain legitimacy, did the same. Too many books, published from the late sixties to now, are stylistically brilliant and essentially dull.

Last summer, in the midst of the hype for *Independence Day* and just before my Worldcon experience, *The New Yorker*, the bastion of the modernist story, published a startling essay. The essay, by Bill Buford, examines the modernist trend in fiction and declares it *a failure*. He writes that because mainstream fiction has turned its back on the narrative, on *storytelling*, that mainstream non-fiction has adopted the narrative instead. People have turned away from this type of fiction, he writes, because it does not satisfy their needs.

His conclusion is the most important part of the essay:

> What is much more interesting is that storytelling has taken over the business of writing. A crucial assumption of modernism — that because narrative distorts reality it should be abandoned — has itself been abandoned....
>
> Implicit in the extraordinary revival of storytelling is the possibility that we need stories — that they are the fundamental unit of knowledge, the foundation of memory, essential to the way we make sense of our lives: the beginning, middle and end of our

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personal and collective trajectories. It is possible that narrative is as important to writing as the human body is to representative painting. We have returned to narratives — in many fields of knowledge — because it is impossible to live without them.[1]

Science fiction literature imitated the modernist movement in mainstream fiction often without understanding it, thinking that by adopting stylistic prose at the expense of narrative, sf would gain a legitimacy it lacked. Instead, science fiction literature finds itself in the same predicament as the modern mainstream novel: its reading audience is both aging and declining. Instead of examining this phenomenon honestly as mainstream publications like *The New Yorker* are doing, the inner core of science fiction — many of the folks who worked in the genre for the last thirty years — *are blaming the readers!*

What this means is this: unless those in charge of publishing sf change their attitudes, science fiction novels will go the way of the western even while the culture itself gets more and more enamored with science fiction. Americans love sf; we have since its inception. If sf lovers can't find good sf stories in books, we will look for them in film, on television, even in computer games.

I am not concerned that the science fiction genre will die. I do, however, believe that sf publishing must make a sea-change, and quickly. Instead of insulting its readers by publishing books that lack narrative drive — lack storytelling — and then blaming the readers for failing to buy those books, science fiction needs to return to its roots. The best sf writers of the past told stories so great that even though technology may have outpaced the technology described within, even though the science is incorrect or out of date, the stories live on. Not because the language is beautiful, not because the ideas are profound, but because *the reader wants to find out what happens next.*

Good fiction respects and challenges its readership. Good fiction lasts because of the stories. Shakespeare is beloved in translation because he told rollicking good stories. People still read Poe because he told terrifying stories. And a hundred years from now, people will probably read Stephen King — not some stylistic artiste — because

[1] *The New Yorker*, June 24 & July 1, 1996

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King respects his audience by telling good stories.

Do I want to see more science fiction in the media? Of course. When this issue goes to bed, a dozen friends and I will go see *Star Trek: First Contact* on its opening night. I watch science fiction television, and own a number of sf CD-ROM games.

But I also want to continue reading sf in short story and novel form. I love cuddling up under a blanket, a cat on my lap and a cup of tea in my hand, and reading an sf book. I don't want that experience to go away. And if some sf editors — and their writers — continue to believe the audience is style deaf, sf literature in book form will continue to decline.

It's time to honor the narrative again. It's time to return to the story.

And it's essential we do so now.

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Michael Thomas is new to fiction writing. "Nightwatch" is his first published short story, although he has two others in our inventory. He is not new to writing, however. He makes his living as a non-fiction writer and editor of Detroit Medical News, *a weekly news magazine for physicians. He lives in Michigan with his wife and daughter.*

He writes that this story was inspired by his golden retriever. "Often I would take [the dog] for a run when I woke up in the morning. Just as often I was too lazy to take him out. On the mornings when I intended to take him out, he bounded up to me ready to go even before I made it out of bed. On the mornings when I wasn't taking him, he didn't even bother to wake up. As far as I could tell there was no difference in the way I acted, or in the time of day, [things] that would have been a clue to a human being about my intentions. The dog, however, had his own clues although I have no idea what they were. Somehow, the result was 'Nightwatch.'"

Nightwatch

By Michael Thomas

HAD THE PACK MAULED A gardener, or a guest, or a halfwit local boy, then perhaps their crime would have been hushed up, but they had turned on their master, old Rutger Hannover himself, and thereby earned their doom.

I had met Hannover only once, the day he came to GenTech to watch the demonstration and buy the dogs. I expected someone imposing, as if all his wealth and power would be manifest in a physical form sculpted from bronze, but Hannover turned out to be amazingly ordinary: short and paunchy with a receding hairline, skin the color of a mushroom, wispy fine hair, eyes glazed into a dull stare. Were it not for the retinue of security people and flunkies following him, he might have been mistaken for someone's tax accountant.

He came to GenTech and impassively watched the demonstration. Two lab assistants hid in the woods beyond the buildings, one in an old drainage ditch to the east and the other in the boughs of an ash tree to the

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west. My pack was told to find one intruder, hold him and under no circumstances harm him. They raced like a single organism through the pines, catching the scent, panting from the chase until they reached the stream. They guessed the stream was a trick, searched out the scent, then hesitated when the scent divided in two. I told Hannover they had a decision to make. After moments, they split into two groups, Speaker and Toto and Lancelot heading west while Captain Eddie and Bo and Merlin charged eastward. Soon both intruders were brought to bay. Abstract thought, I told Hannover, decision-making powers and symbolic communication and, for Speaker at least, even the gift of speech.

So Rutger Hannover bought my dogs, paid enough to fund GenTech's research for years, and took them to his summer retreat in Maine. I told myself it was only research, the pack nothing more than experimental subjects, oversized lab rats, but for days after they were gone I found myself reaching down to pet heads that no longer followed me, hearing barks where there was only silence, finding my eyes unexpectedly misting over.

Years passed; my work at GenTech brought me prestige and a professorship at the University of Michigan. The pack receded from my memory. Then the word came that my genetically engineered dogs had ripped open Rutger Hannover's throat and had escaped into the mountains. I assumed they would be tracked down and killed. Instead, Rutger Hannover's daughter sought me out and asked me to help her save the pack that had destroyed her father.

At first I thought she was a student. Blue eyes spaced wide apart, shapeless brown hair, pudgy frame, looking lost, she peered around the door of my office. "Professor Nelson?" she asked.

"My office hours don't start for another hour," I said. "Come back then."

"My name is Kara Hannover," she said and stepped into my office.

"Oh."

"My father...."

"Yes. I heard it on the news. I'm very sorry."

She walked to the chair in front of my desk. My work had earned me a large corner office in the the newest wing of the genetic research

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building. The walls were white, the furniture new and composed of graceful curved lines, track lighting bright enough to wash out any shadows, the carpet plush and stain-free. With her torn jeans, baggy sweater and greasy hair she looked as out of place in my office as a weed springing from my carpet.

"I want to ask you for help," she said.

"Miss Hannover, when your father came to me I explained the risks involved. Simple breeding is unpredictable enough. Large-scale genetic engineering is light-years beyond breeding in its risks. He understood, even signed a waiver. I'm afraid...."

She fished a cigarette from her jacket pocket and struck a match to it.

"Smoking is not allowed here," I said.

She blinked at me, looking as if I had demanded she jump from the window, then shrugged her shoulders. She glanced around for someplace to put out the cigarette, finally decided on the wastebasket. I ignored the stench of the smoke, kept my mouth shut about the fire hazard. "You were saying."

"They're hunting the pack. They mean to kill them. If you came, maybe you could communicate with them. Help them."

"I'm sure the police don't need my help."

"I meant help the dogs."

"I beg your pardon?"

"They're my friends. I want you to save them."

I assumed she was still in a state of shock. "I'm not sure I understand. They killed your father. You want to save them?"

"Yes."

"I would have thought you'd want them killed."

She shook her head, slowly, sadly, a gesture she seemed all too comfortable with. "I was nine years old when my father brought the pack home. I wasn't allowed to play with them. He said they were only to be used for security at the summer house. They were too valuable — like his Pierce Arrow. But I couldn't resist. I mean, dogs that can think and talk! So I snuck into the kennel. Speaker was very kind to me. I think they were lonely. They spoke of you."

I winced, remembering the old pandemonium when I entered the kennel: Speaker nudging my hand, Captain Eddie bullying the others

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away so that he could have the prime spot at my side, Merlin never able to stop himself from jumping on me. I missed Speaker most of all: the most human, the most gentle, the most loyal. "What did they say?" I asked.

"They missed you. They said when you were alpha, they felt more human."

"Alpha?" I had always wondered how they viewed me; apparently I had taken on the role of alpha male in their pack. Only alpha males do not typically sell their pack mates. "Go on," I said.

"They became my friends. The security guards let me get away with it. No one dared tell my father. I took them for long runs. It was lonely at the summer house. No other children to play with, whole summers spent alone. I needed companions. Some nights we spent hours talking."

"About what?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "They're very curious about humans. We don't make much sense to them. They wanted to know about power, about mating, about technology."

"You mean Speaker did."

"Yes, but I think he spoke for the whole pack."

"So tell me, if it's not too upsetting, what happened to your father?"

"It was my sixteenth birthday."

Sixteen? She looked as if she had seen too much of life to be only sixteen.

"My father liked to arrange special entertainment for his friends. One year he hired skywriters to write each guest's name above the house. This year he used the dogs. He had two of his security people hide in the hills beyond the house. They were supposed to hide in two different places to challenge the dogs."

I felt a twinge of guilt.

"He hired these little carts, sort of like golf carts, so the guests could follow the pack. The whole thing disgusted me so I stayed at the house."

"You didn't go? It was your birthday."

"Yes, but it wasn't my party. It was his. The guests were his friends and business associates. I would have preferred no party, but he would not hear of it. So basically it was his birthday party.

"From what I understand they took off after the pack. When the dogs solved the puzzle, part of the guests followed one half of the pack and my

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father and the others followed the second half. His party caught up with the pack just as the dogs tracked down their query. My father — he was drunk — cut a corner on the side of a knoll too sharp and tipped his cart over. It pinned his legs. Then — one of the dogs.... By the time the other guests reacted, it was too late. The pack took off for the hills."

She reached for the pocket where she kept her cigarettes, then dropped her hand to her lap.

"Which dog?" I asked.

"Speaker," she said.

A hole formed where my stomach should have been.

"I'm still not sure what you want me to do."

"Come back with me. Help me track them down. Maybe you can explain what happened. Maybe there was a reason. Maybe you can save them."

I shook my head. "I'm deeply sorry for this tragedy, but I don't think I can really help. If the police can't track the pack down, I doubt if we could. And even if we could, there's no reason to think I'd have any better luck then anyone else."

Besides, I thought, they were obviously dangerous.

"I may know where they are," she said.

"Where?"

"When we are there I will tell you. And yes, you do have more of a chance to save them. You created them. You know what they are. And — he talked often of you. In a way, they saw you as their father."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's true. That's how he talked about you. He said he wanted to see you again."

"I can't. I have exams in a week and...." I left the next thought unsaid. My position, my work, might be jeopardized if my name became further associated with the killing. Some people still remembered the pack was my creation, but so far I had escaped involvement in the whole fiasco.

"I understand. I'll go myself."

"Not alone?"

"Of course."

"They killed your father. They're dangerous."

"They are my friends."

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"This is insane."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

She stood to leave, passed beneath the bright track lighting and left my office. She did not, however, pass from my life. The next morning I awoke thinking of her. As I left for my office, the thought of safely hiding away in my academic life while she put herself in danger nauseated me, hiding away while Speaker and the rest were hunted down.

As if the past seven years had never happened, I reached down to pet Speaker's head, grasped only air.

Was the tragedy my fault? Had there been something in the engineering I had missed, or screwed up that led them to turn on Hannover the way over-bred St. Bernards had once turned vicious? If so, then my duty was to make sure they hurt no one else. She wanted me to help them, but I might help the police track them down. The thought of being their Judas made me feel as if hot metal impaled my gut. Maybe I could save them. Maybe I would destroy them.

By the end of the day all I wanted was to take some action, any action at all to end the war in my brain. I decided to track down Kara Hannover.

MY KNOWLEDGE of New England consisted of several conferences held within comfortable hotels, a guest lectureship at Johns Hopkins, and a frustrating day of maneuvering a rented car through rotaries in an attempt to find Cape Cod. I imagined the countryside as being a postcard, covered bridges and all that.

As I drove north from Portland, the landscape slowly took on a life of its own, far removed from my sentimental imagination. The land rose to foothills then climbed to rounded mountains, pine and fir covered, fog wreathed, dark despite the afternoon sun. To reach the Hannover estate, I drove a series of two lane roads, through small towns consisting of old frame houses, closed gas stations, rusting cars in fields like the fossils of armored prehistoric beasts. There was something mournful about those towns, something dark, as if behind the curtained windows unspeakable acts occurred, horrible urges drove men to banal acts of violence.

I have never responded all that much to nature. I could unlock secrets of the cell, but the composite beings and landscapes formed from those

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cells never struck a responsive chord in my heart. The country always seemed to me a place of narrow minds and crushing drudgery and lives wasted in a lack of ambition.

At last I drove up a paved access road and reached the estate of Rutger Hannover. Beyond the chain link fence, state police cars and pickup trucks were parked in the grass next to the three-story manor house. Hounds bayed and strained at the leash.

The banshee cry of helicopter blades screamed above me. The helicopter swept across the compound, soared, headed for the mountains.

The death of Rutger Hannover was major news and an army of news trucks almost blocked the main entrance. As I drove past them, I kept my head down as if the reporters would recognize me and blare my name across their headlines.

The guard at the gatehouse directed me to a Captain Davis, whom I found barking orders at a squad of state police, Hannover security men and local volunteers.

Kara sat on the front porch steps, watching the men through a haze of cigarette smoke. She nodded at me, flicked her cigarette into the grass. The Hannover summer house was a three-story Victorian mansion large enough to be a hotel. Hannover had flown the thing from England and reassembled it here.

Captain Davis, squat and beer-bellied, eyed me as if I were one of the fugitive dogs. When I introduced myself, he said, "So you're the one."

"Excuse me?"

"You're the one who made these hellish creatures."

"Well," I said, "I'm not sure if hellish is the right word."

"The Pope says it's blasphemy, making animals in man's image."

"You're Catholic?"

"No, but I'm Christian."

His search party had formed a circle around me and stared as if ready to pounce at a signal from their Captain.

"I'm here to help," I said.

"We don't need it," Davis said. I expected him to spit tobacco at my feet, but he merely grunted. "They're damned smart, but we'll find 'em. The national guard's combing the mountains right now. We're taking to

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the farmlands to the east. Our dogs will track 'em down. We don't need no help to put bullets through their brains."

"I'm sure you have everything under control," I said.

"Damn right," Davis said.

"Look here," a civilian cradling a shotgun said. "Can these dogs breed?"

"Depends on whether Hannover had them neutered."

"'Cause they've been loose for days now. If they've screwed some of the local dogs, then God only knows how many monsters they'll breed."

"It doesn't quite work that way."

"I hear it does," another man snapped.

The crowd parted and made way for Kara as she walked to me and took my arm. "Doctor Nelson has come at my request. He's been good enough to offer his services."

Reluctantly, the men backed off, probably out of respect for a teenager who had just lost her father.

"Well then," Davis said, "we'll call if we need you. Let's move out. Ray, get the dogs. We'll start at the Miller farm."

It took a good twenty minutes for the party to finally roar off in their squad cars and pickup trucks, leaving Kara and me on the front lawn.

"Thank you for coming," she said.

"No need to thank me."

"Let's go now. I have backpacks ready."

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked.

"Up there," she said and pointed to the mountain behind the manor house. A brown scar of leveled forest, sutured by telephone lines, disfigured the fir-covered face of the mountain. For a moment, a helicopter circled the peak like a bird of prey, then vanished over the mountain.

"You know," I said, "wandering around up there when trigger happy National Guardsmen and local folks are out hunting isn't the safest thing I can think of. I wouldn't want one of them mistaking me for a squirrel."

Kara hoisted her pack to her shoulders and headed for the mountain. Without looking back she said, "We won't wander much. I know where we're going."

"Which is?"

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"An old fire tower."

"What makes you think they'll be there? They could be in a different county by now."

"It's the best I can do," she said and marched off.

I slipped my pack's straps over my shoulders and followed. I had hoped there would be a path, but instead we climbed directly through the trees. Before long, my middle-aged knees and thighs ached from the uphill climb and the effort of scrambling over brambles and undergrowth. My feet slipped on the wet carpet of pine needles. Once as I slipped, I reached out to break my fall by grabbing a trunk; rough bark raked my hand, drew blood. The longer we climbed, the more I felt old and fat.

"Are you all right?" Kara called back to me.

"Fine," I lied. My lungs ached and my shoulders burned beneath the pack.

Kara negotiated the mountainside like a mountain cat. I stifled my complaints and did my best to keep up with her, ashamed to admit I couldn't keep up and needed a break.

In three hours, we covered perhaps only a mile and a half, our pace slowed by the steep grade. I was ready to quit when Kara said, "Over there."

The turret shape of an old fire tower poked above the trees. "My hideaway," Kara said. "I used to play there, to get away from my family. I pretended it was a castle."

"What makes you think the pack will come here?"

"Because I told them about it. Told them what this place meant to me. And I think they'll know I've come here."

"How?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know. Maybe they'll smell me. I just know they'll come."

It seemed a ridiculous assumption to me, but then the whole trek seemed like a waste of time. Still I followed her up the remaining one hundred yards and helped her off with her pack. Inside, we climbed the rickety stairs, sidestepping rotted boards and dodging spider webs, until we emerged into a circular room at the top. She led me onto the balcony. The mountains rolled around us like great waves; below us the dark expanse of a river cut through a gorge; mist clung to the heights, seemed

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ready to reach out and brush our skin with delicate fingers. In the far distance dark storm clouds bruised the horizon a deep purple.

How far had we traveled from the plush carpet of my office?

These were ancient mountains; slumbering for centuries; moaning in their sleep.

"It'll be dark soon," I said. "We can't wait that long."

"We may have to spend the night," she said.

"But, is it safe?"

"No choice," she said.

I looked out across the mountains. In the distance the hounds of the search party bayed. Men shouted. I shuddered. From the damp, I told myself. Nothing more.

WITH THE NIGHT came the cold. Kara had brought the latest in thermal blankets: lightweight nylon webbed with filaments that captured our body heat. We sat inside the tower, wrapped in our blankets, feeling as if we were warming ourselves before a fire in a cave. A pocket torch propped on the floor cast half her face in bluish light, left the other half in shadow.

"So this was your playhouse," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Like I said, it was lonely. I went exploring often, found this place, sometimes spent whole days here."

"Your parents didn't mind? I mean it's not exactly safe."

She lit a cigarette. I almost gagged at the smell, but kept quiet.

"I don't think they knew I was gone," she said. "I was like a piece of the furniture. You don't really think about furniture unless you need to sit down."

Adolescent moping was as normal as flu season; most of my students were afflicted by it, whining about the past, wearing their angst like a black cape. I wasn't sure how much of Kara's self-pity was only an effect of her age, and how much of it was justified. The one time I had met Rutger Hannover, he had been polite, brisk and business-like. And yet I had walked away with an intense dislike for the man. At the time I told myself it was probably simple sour grapes over his money. Seeing his daughter, I wasn't sure. I have found that power does not corrupt.

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People who seek power are already corrupted.

"I was pregnant once," she said. Her voice was neutral, as if she were reading aloud from a phonebook.

"Oh," was all I could think of as a response.

"I was in love with this boy in school. His family wasn't as wealthy as mine, but close. He was always fighting his parents. Failing school. They were appalled. They threatened to send him to a military school. He said if they did he'd learn the arts of war and come back and wipe them off the face of the Earth. He was so romantic."

"If you say so."

"So I got pregnant. My parents arranged an abortion. I refused. I told my boyfriend and begged him to take me away. To Europe or someplace. He thought about it, but when he realized his parents would cut him off from his money, he urged me to go along with the abortion. So I gave in. Later my father told me that while I was undergoing the operation, they had a limiter implanted in my ovaries."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A limiter. It's the latest version of a chastity belt. Nanotechnology. It kills sperm. The machinery perpetuates itself so it never runs out. It can only be disarmed by a chemical code. My parents held onto the code like it was the key to the chastity belt. They could decide when and with whom I would get pregnant."

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. "What bastards. But that can't be legal?"

The corner of her lips facing the light curled into a lightning bolt of a smile. "Legal? What's legal is defined by how much money you have."

"I guess so," I said. I had already tasted Rutger Hannover's money. In a sense he had paid for the last seven years of my life.

After that we said little. Kara smoked and I listened to the sounds of the night. Soon I was dozing.

I awoke to find Kara's arm on mine, her face close to me. "Outside," she whispered. "A noise. I think it's them."

We slipped onto the balcony. The sky was ablaze with stars. The moon plated the mountains in silver. Below, shadows crept from the dark mass of the trees, six of them, sniffing the ground, tails down, ears alert. One face turned upward and stared at us.

"I'm going down," she said.

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"Kara, wait...."

But she was gone. I raced after her, caught up with her just as she opened the door at the bottom of the stairs.

Moonlight reflected from six pairs of eyes. I could hear their breathing in the darkness, see steam rising.

Kara ran to them, knelt and hugged one shaggy head while the others crowded around her.

Then a head turned toward me, regarded me with shining eyes. "James," it said, a deep inhuman sound like a growl tricked into forming words.

"Speaker," I said.

"Come so that we can know you," Speaker said.

For a moment I felt dizzy, then forced myself into the moonlight. The great shepherd bodies surrounded me, sniffed my legs, nudged my hands. At last Speaker licked my palm. "We are glad," he said.

They were all there, Speaker and Captain Eddie and Toto and Merlin and Bo and Sir Lancelot, as I had left them, as if the years had never gone by. My eyes misted over. I quickly rubbed them dry.

"We've come to help you," Kara said. "They're hunting you — because of my father."

"We know," Speaker said.

I knelt down and Captain Eddie, the largest, muscled the others away to take his old spot in front of me, leaning his bulk against my side. In terms of the pack, Captain Eddie assumed dominance, but from a human point of view it was obvious that Speaker was the alpha male. I scratched Eddie behind his ears. Merlin paced nervously, tried to move in, was pushed away by Eddie, who soon had Merlin on his back, throat exposed. Captain Eddie then resumed his place of honor by my side. Speaker ignored them and curled up next to Kara, the real spot of power.

"Speaker," I said, "I've missed you."

"Yes, James," he said. Whether he understood the concept or not, I couldn't tell.

"Where have you been hiding?"

"Trees. Mountains. No man smell on the wind."

"What do you eat?"

"We hunt."

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"Speaker, do you know why the men are hunting you?"

"Because of the father of Kara."

"That was bad."

Speaker laid his shaggy head on Kara's leg. She stroked his back while he stretched. "Why did you kill him?" Kara asked.

He was silent for a moment, the other dogs suddenly prowling around us, wolf shapes in pale moonlight. At last Speaker said, "We protect Kara."

"Why did Kara need protecting?" I said.

"The hurt smell."

"What hurt smell?"

"Kara's father. The hurt smell. He hurts."

Kara turned her head toward me and although I couldn't make out her features in the dark, I guessed she needed an answer.

"Speaker, did you smell the hurt smell before?"

"He hurts the sun girl. He hurts others."

I asked Kara if she knew who the sun girl was; she shook her head. She said, "Speaker, tell me about the sun girl."

"We sleep. He comes to the kennel. The sun girl is there. He punishes her. He holds her down. We smell the human blood."

Kara was silent; I followed suit, unwilling to disturb whatever feelings she had about her father and this story.

"Who was the sun girl?" Kara asked.

"The one with your face and sun hair."

Kara groaned, then stifled her voice into a monotone, the voice that masked the ache inside. "My cousin. She stayed with us one summer for a week. Something happened, I never knew what. They took her away. There were rumors about an institution. Oh god."

"Speaker," I said. "You saw Kara's father hurt the sun girl?"

"Yes."

"You said there were others he hurt."

"Yes."

"In the kennel?"

"Yes."

"And you thought he was going to hurt Kara?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

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"The hurt smell."

Kara said, "What does that mean?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "You said your father had been drinking that day. Perhaps he was drunk when he...." I left the rest unsaid, but placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She felt fragile beneath my palm. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," she said, trying to sound tough, but the words sounded strangled. "Then they were protecting me. The police will understand that. They'll leave them alone."

"It may not be that easy," I said. "There's no direct evidence that your father intended to hurt you. Whatever he did in the past has obviously been hushed up. Even if we could get your cousin to talk, it still isn't a reason for what they did."

Kara laughed, but there was a hole in the sound where the humor should have been. "No reason?"

"From our point of view."

"But they're dogs."

"Dogs that can abstract. Whether the hurt smell is alcohol or something else, they knew what it meant. They sensed he was —vicious, going to hurt. The abstracting part of their brains took this sense and postulated that he was going to hurt again and that it might be you. Apparently the other victims were girls or women. They made a decision to stop him."

"Maybe they were right."

"Maybe they misunderstood. Don't sentimentalize them, Kara. They're animals. You know what the first thing a male lion does if he takes over a pride? He eats the children. And he probably doesn't feel much remorse over it. We can't really understand them yet and they may not understand us. They may have misinterpreted whatever they sensed from your father."

"I know in my heart they were right."

"Even if they were, it won't make much of a difference to that posse we just met. The dogs killed a human being. People will want revenge."

"Then what can we do?"

I watched the shapes prowling through the night, felt a vague, primeval dread as if I were a Neanderthal frightened by the shapes prowling beyond the cave. They had taken it upon themselves to kill;

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there was no reason to assume they might not do it again. Perhaps they should be killed. I shivered in the cold mountain wind.

WE SPENT THE NIGHT with the pack, both of us chilled by the mountain winds despite our thermal blankets, but reluctant to move into the fire tower; the dogs balked at entering and Kara and I wanted to spend every minute we had with them. When the sky turned pale gray above the rounded peaks, the pack became restless, wary of the day and the hunters.

Kara knelt between Bo and Merlin. I took the opportunity to draw Speaker away from the others.

"Speaker, tell me about Kara's father."

"What do you wish to know?" he said in his deep growl-like voice.

"Was he kind to you?"

"He brings others of his kind to see us. They throw food into the kennels. They make the laughing sound."

"Did he ever hurt you?"

"No," Speaker said.

Speaker lay on his stomach and licked at a spot on his forepaw where he had obsessively licked the skin into an open wound. Lick spots were common among certain breeds. Veterinarians ascribed the behavior to boredom. That, of course, was in normal dogs. What it meant in Speaker was hard to judge.

"Speaker, did you hate Kara's father?"

He went on licking, silent, as if pondering the question. "We do not know hate," Speaker said.

"Do you know what the word means?"

"You tell me about these things. Hate is — intense hostility and aversion."

His answer surprised me; it was a dictionary definition, taught to him years ago.

"But what does that mean?"

Speaker ceased licking and stared forlornly at me. I decided on a different tack. For better or for worse he was my creation; I had to know what manner of being I had created.

"Speaker, what did you feel when you killed Kara's father?"

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"We feel our hearts beating. Wind roars. Smell of machine blood. We taste man blood. All around the flashing light in the sky."

"Lightning?"

"Yes. We are lightning in our blood."

"Were you angry?"

"We cannot say."

"Why not?"

"Angry is human."

"How do you feel when Kara pets you?"

"Warm. Lying on blankets. Full stomachs. No hurt. We sleep. Hurt does not come. We are we."

I resisted the temptation to ask how he felt when I was near. Instead, I asked, "What would you do if I tried to hurt you?"

He began to lick again. "Show my belly."

"What would you feel?"

"Lost in the woods. No more we. Bodies fall apart. Flashing lights in the sky."

"Would you kill me?"

"We would be — no more."

"What does that mean?"

He looked up at me; in the now gray light of dawn he looked helpless to explain.

"Does that mean if you hurt me, someone would kill you?"

"No," Speaker said. "We are no more."

"Tell me about the we."

"We run. Captain Eddie runs treeside. Merlin runs not Captain Eddie. Speaker runs not Merlin. Toto runs not Sir Lancelot. Toto is meat of small creature newly killed. We are Toto. We are mud and tall trees. We are a mate not-we. The not-we calls with the scent of the not born children. Captain Eddie runs not Toto. Merlin runs treeside where Captain Eddie is not. Speaker runs behind where Bo is not. We are water rushing over stones. We are high high rocks higher than trees. We are the flashing light on the wind. We are the water things. We are smell of dead fish. We are smell of seaweed. We are the warming warming sun. We are the kill birds in the high high nests. We are the smell of their eggs. Captain Eddie runs not Speaker. Merlin runs not Captain Eddie. Toto runs not Sir Lancelot.

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We are golden light through the trees. We are water and the crashing sound. High high high rocks. The not-we runs. Captain Eddie runs toward the sun. The not-we turns from him. Water crashing. Hot hot hot sun. We taste the blood of the not we. We are warm sun to our bones. We are smell of fur. We are smell of bodies. We are taste of wet fur. We sleep."

If a physicist told me that gravity is a bend in space caused by mass, I could probably understand in an abstract way. But I could never understand in a really substantial way, never make that concept part of my being, because I do not live in a universe where I actually experience space bending. Space is the absence of anything to bend. Was Speaker in the same situation, trying to understand concepts that had no reality in his world?

Or was I the one trying to understand his concepts that had no reality in my world?

"Speaker, what will you do now?"

"We hunt."

I expected more; he only continued licking.

I reached down, scratched him behind his ear.

We joined the others. The sky above the mountains was amber, the color of caution. The day was beginning. Soon the helicopters would return; the baying of hounds would fill the mountains.

Speaker leaned against my side, sniffed my hand.

"Speaker," I said. "At night. Return here."

"Yes, James," he said.

And they were gone, disappearing into the long shadows beneath the trees as quietly as mist dissolved into the morning air.

Kara looked up at me; dirty streaks stained her cheeks. "There is evil in the world," she said. "I never believed that before."

I shrugged my shoulders. "In our world. I'm not sure the concept makes sense in their world."

"My father. Why — would he...?"

"Because it was easy, I guess. I can't pretend to know."

Again she wiped her eyes. "You'll convince them, won't you? You can make them see — leave the dogs alone."

Would I?

No matter what the reason, no matter the justification, they had

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killed a man. I could not share Kara's faith; if the hunters found them, no matter what I said, they would be killed. If they eluded the searchers, which I had no doubt they could do, who was to say they might not kill again?

I told myself old Rutger Hannover deserved to die.

It made no difference. They might kill again. I could not have more blood on my hands.

I looked out at the mountains, the sunward sides of the pines ablaze with light, the other sides deep in shadow. Far below us an engine raced. Dogs barked.

"I once read an animal behaviorist who talked about ritual behavior in animals," I said. "He made a point that at the time I couldn't understand. He said that an animal's ritualized behavior, mating or fighting for instance, was in itself the animal's feeling about the act. Love is the act of the mating ritual. I think I glimpse now what he meant. Speaker does not feel hatred. He does not feel murderous rage. He feels the act of doing something, of licking your hand or ripping your throat. Feeling, act and motivation are one and the same. Only now he can abstract. He can decide. He can plan. He can understand our words. In a human it would be as if our unconscious drives and our rational intellect were one and the same. I don't think we can even pretend to imagine his experience of the world." A new idea occurred to me. "The human brain evolved too fast. Usually evolution occurs through a slow change in physical structure. The fin becomes a hand. But the human brain evolved so fast that there was no time for the structures to change, so new structures were simply overlaid on top of the old, the mammalian warmth on top of the cold reptilian instinct for survival, the human reason on top of both. So we are all three at once — split, divided creatures. Speaker, on the other hand, because we were able to change his genetic structure, is not split. His mammalian brain and his new human thinking powers are united. He might be what we should have been."

"You'll tell them that, won't you?"

"Of course," I said. Poor Kara. She wasn't old enough to understand that everything I could tell them would only provide another justification to end the pack's existence. Not many humans would be able to tolerate

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the realization that dogs had just leaped ahead of them on the evolutionary scale.

The downward trek was much easier, yet by the time we reached the manor house, the sun was directly above us and we were both tired and sweating. The grounds were deserted, the posse off on its chase. We helped ourselves to old Rutger Hannover's food, then Kara fell asleep in a wicker chair on the sun porch. Soon, I too dozed in the cool of the paneled living room.

Late in the afternoon, I awoke to the sound of voices on the lawn. I let Kara sleep, wandered into the sunlight to find Captain Davis and his men. He studied me as I approached, his dull expression like a barn owl waiting for a mouse.

"Well," he said. "So I suppose you found 'em, aye?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

They stared at me as if I were a lunatic.

"We talked to them. They were protecting Kara. It seems as if they witnessed Hannover molesting some of his relatives. So they stopped him before he could hurt anyone else."

"You're shitting me," Davis said.

Another man laughed.

"You don't have to take my word for it. Talk to Kara's cousin. Now that Hannover is dead, she'll probably confirm it."

Captain Davis studied me, chewing his lip, frowning. At last he said, "That's crap. But even if it's true, it won't make any difference. They still got to be brought down."

"I know," I said. I had known it all along and despite the feeling like some vital organ shredding inside my gut, I knew I would help destroy them. They were dangerous. "There's an old fire tower three quarters of the way up that mountain. They'll come there tonight."

"How do you know that?"

"I told them to be there. In some ways they still think I'm their master."

From the contempt on their faces, I knew they were now convinced I was crazy. Still, Davis was smart enough to know their search had been fruitless and he had no more cards to play.

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"If this is a wild goose chase I'll personally jail your ass."

No doubt with pleasure.

I watched them hurry for the tree line, disappear into the pines, swept up again in the hunt.

The pain was gone; I was numb, too depressed to feel much of anything. My first inclination was to run, before I had to face Kara, before I heard the guns firing in the mountains, but instead I went into the house. Fatigue drained me like a fever. I sat down, intending to rest a moment before leaving. Soon I slept and dreamed of shapes racing through moonlit trees.

I awoke to find real moonlight casting silver pools across the hardwood floors. The sun room across the hall was ablaze in the moonlight. The wicker chair was empty.

"Kara!" I called.

The house was quiet.

I struggled from the chair and at the bottom of the broad staircase I called her again. I heard nothing.

Floorboards creaked at the far end of the hall. I traced the sound to the ballroom, hesitated with my hand on the door knob. I could lie to her, knew I wouldn't. How could I make her understand it was for the best?

I opened the door. Moonlight shining through Venetian blinds cut knife wounds through the darkness. Shapes prowled the shadows. One massive shape perched on the grand piano and watched me. Another padded across the dance floor, a third circled the bar, stalked toward me. My heart raced like a berserk clock.

On the couch Kara sat with Speaker at her feet.

There was silence except for the myriad concussions of their breathing. A low growl rumbled across the room.

"They knew," Kara said.

"What?" My voice sounded odd in my ears, as if someone else had spoken.

"They knew it was a trap."

"I had to," I said, sounding lame. "I had no choice."

"I guess it doesn't matter," she said. "They're safe. They'll go now. No one will find them except maybe me. They'll live free."

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I stepped forward. To my right, Captain Eddie growled. I froze.

"Speaker, I'm sorry. I never meant you any harm."

Kara laughed. "Really? Can you guess how they knew it was a trap? They figured it out, of course, but do you know what the clue was? The hurt smell."

"What?"

"Whatever it was they smelled on my father, they smelled on you too. It wasn't alcohol. It was something much more —terrible. The smell of your blood, of your corruption. You're the scientist, you figure it out."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it? Did you even try to help them?"

I could say nothing.

"No, you just turned them in, didn't you? Maybe you just didn't want them around to spoil your precious job and your precious reputation. Or maybe you just didn't want them around because they reminded you of what you did to them, what you were responsible for when my father died."

"They killed. I had no choice."

"You had a choice."

"Speaker?"

His low growl drifted through the darkness. "Yes, James."

"What was it? What did you know about me?"

"Hurt smell."

"Like Kara's father?"

"Yes, James. The hurt smell draws the men there. We go there never."

I tried to protest, but the words refused to come; on the edge of my mind a thought formed, wordless and yet vivid like the scent of a storm brought on the wind. I knew Kara was right. Somehow they knew me right down to the scents of the chemical reactions in my cells. All of my noble rationalizations crumbled like sand.

Kara petted Speaker's head. "Go now. Be safe."

Speaker nuzzled her hand, then turned toward me. "Good-bye, James."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"James runs with the pack," he said. "Kara runs with the pack. We are we."

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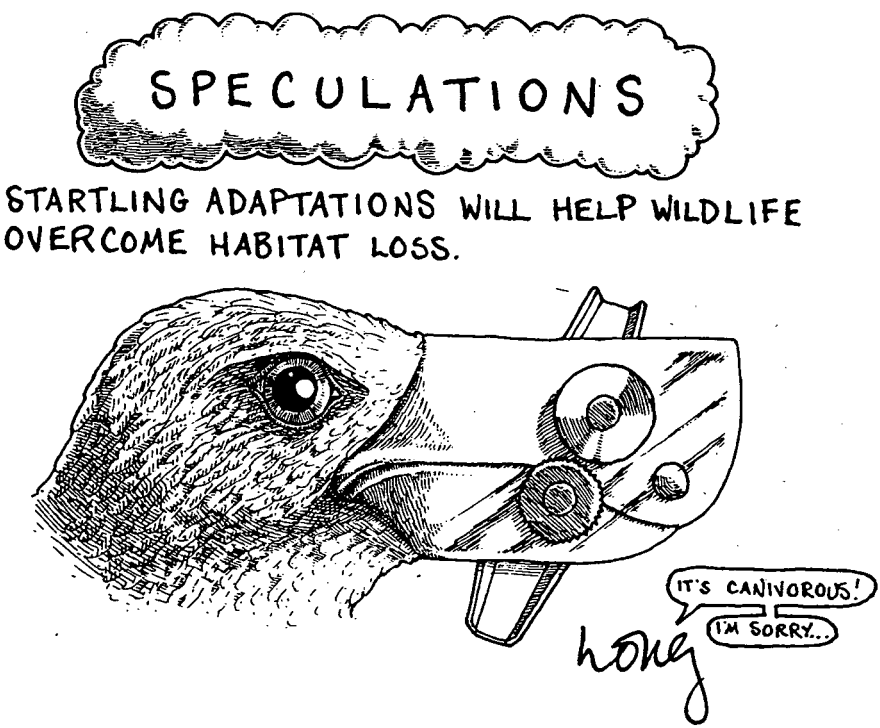
Then they were gone, through the patio door, as swift and quiet as shadows. I followed them outside and watched them climb the mountain face. Soon they were lost in the darkness of the trees. Perhaps that local had been right; perhaps they would breed.

Now, years later, I feel as if they are with me, at odd moments, driving alone at night, or sometimes when I lecture. From time to time I receive anonymous letters, newspaper clippings usually about strange events on the east coast: a farmer's chicken coup raided, strange shapes seen in the woods at night, hunters' camps mysteriously destroyed, local dogs disappearing.

Now, I teach not so much about cells, but of the communal creatures they form, less about the grammar of DNA and more about how DNA creates the grand syntax of love and need and betrayal and loyalty.

Most of all I teach that we are no longer alone.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Bear Went Over the Mountain, by William Kotzwinkle, Doubleday, 1996, $22.50

GOOD humor is probably the hardest sort of fiction to write.

If authors have any sort of skill at all in creating believable characters that we can care about, all they need to do is put them in some sort of peril, or present them with a problem, and then, because we're already interested in these fictional people, we'll read on to find out what happens next. Authors of humor have to be able to do that as well, but they also have to be funny. And that's not easy at all.

There are different kinds of funny, of course. The most common, and easiest to write, are slapstick and stories that depend on punchlines. The first can wear thin quickly; the latter, too often, become only extended jokes. Much more satisfying to readers in the long run, and what they will remember and reread, are stories that are inherently funny, stories in which the humor grows out of the character, the situation, the writing style — and sometimes all three. They might involve slapstick and puns and punchline, but the story doesn't depend solely upon any of them.

For some reason the British seem to do this best — or at least they do so according to my sense of humor, at any rate — but like all things that seem to be true, there are glorious exceptions. In North America we have Tom Robbins, for example. And more to the point of this review, we have William Kotzwinkle.

But first a caveat. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* does require that you have some familiarity with the book business. I just can't see it being as effective without it.

And now, caveat aside, I have to tell you that this is the funniest and most entertaining book I've read in years. I rarely laugh out loud when reading — even collections of newspaper strips and the like — but there were times reading this that I simply had to put the book down because I

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couldn't see the page for laughing.

What's it about? A bear "finds" a novel manuscript under a tree and promptly heads off to New York City with it, gets published, is wooed by academic pundits, Hollywood agents and the like, and goes on a book tour. The humor from all of this is twofold (once, of course, you accept the premise that a bear could put on some clothes and pass himself off as an author).

First there's the very bearishness of Hal Jam. Others perceive him as suits their purpose, but he remains a bear throughout, constantly having his bearish thoughts, such as looking out at a view of New York City's skyline and realizing how exhausting it will be to mark all that territory.

Secondly there is the manner in which everyone approaches him. They take his commentary (usually revolving around food) and fit it to suit their own agenda. One of my favorite declamations is from an English professor who asserts, "Any real study of contemporary literature begins with those who teach it. The teacher is the key, for it's the teacher who creates that all-important entity, the reader." And a few lines later we discover that his students read what he makes them read, first and foremost of which are the anthologies he's edited for which he receives royalty checks every six months.

I've met that professor, and if you have any familiarity with the book industry, you'll probably meet someone you know in here as well: an editor, an agent, a Hollywood scout, a talk show host, etc.

But what sets Kotzwinkle's book apart from simply being funny is that there is a real story going on at the same time. Two, in fact, because while most of the book revolves around Hal Jam's misadventures in the literary world, the author also has a small plot line devoted to the original author of Hal's book, who is becoming bearish, even while Hal becomes more human, and who eventually sues Hal and his publishing company for stealing his book.

How does it all turn out? Will Hal "find" another novel?

Read the book. But make sure you're either alone so you don't make a fool of yourself with your constant chuckling, or with someone understanding who won't mind your constantly wanting to share the good bits out loud.

Bending the Landscape: Fantasy, edited by Nicola Griffith & Stephen Pagel, Borealis, 1997, $19.99

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In a sense, theme anthologies are the writer's equivalent of an artist's commission. We're approached because the editor wants us to apply our particular style to a specific theme, in the same way that artists working on commission are expected to bring their own artistic sensibility to a specific subject. The success of either depends on how interesting the theme/subject is to the creator and how effectively they can bring their style to it.

Anthologies have an added stress factor, however, in that sometimes the effectiveness of one's work is diluted simply because it is in a theme anthology. Say, the epiphany of your story depends on the revelation that one of the major characters is a vampire. While this could be successful in a general anthology or magazine, in a theme anthology devoted to vampire stories, all the impact will be dissipated.

So while it's entertaining from a writer's point of view to see how well they can work within the particular guidelines, from a reader's point of view, the most successful anthologies are usually those with a more general theme. Women writing science fiction, perhaps. Or, as in the book under discussion, gay fantasy stories.

Now, as in the vampire anthology used as an example above, the gay factor in these stories could conceivably lessen their impact, but the editors have gotten neatly around this for the real theme of *Bending the Landscape: Fantasy* appears to be an exploration of "the other." Now this "other" might be characters who just happen to be queer confronting some alien presence or unknown factor, or it might be the queer characters themselves, but the point is, the frisson of the stories doesn't depend on the obvious.

As the editors put it in their introduction: "We have lesbians writing about gay men, gay men writing about lesbians, and straight folk putting themselves in the shoes of both...each writer has been asked to peer through a lens that bends their particular daily landscape away from its usual form...."

And this the writers do with varying degrees of success.

I never expect to like all the stories in an anthology. In fact, usually I'm happy to find one outstanding story. In this book they came tumbling over themselves. Most outstanding were Kim Antieau's "Desire," in which a lost woman finds herself where she least expects. The juxtaposing of two dissimilar professors in M.W. Keiper's "Full Moon Empty Arms," one a man, the other woman, both turn-

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ing out to have more in common with each other than with the young woman they both love. And Richard Bowes' dark, film noir exploration of human monsters in "In the House of the Man in the Moon."

The odd thing for me was that, for a fantasy anthology, the stories that worked best were mostly contemporary, the ones that often were the least successful were set in a more traditional secondary world. There were exceptions to both, of course, such as Tanya's Huff's rollicking "In Mysterious Ways," which wouldn't be out of place set next to a Fafhrd and Gray Mouser story.

What I liked best was how varied the material was for a theme anthology and all of the stories were worth reading. Which makes me look forward to the subsequent volumes, one of which will be dealing with science fiction, the other horror.

Mermaids: Nymphs of the Sea, by Theodore Gachot, Raincoast Books, Cdn.$39.95

I've a fondness for art books, especially those devoted to fine art as opposed to those that merely reprint genre book covers, or work that might as well be the same. Which is odd, perhaps, because I love a fantasy image. The trouble for me arises in the rendering. There's rarely a painterly quality to genre art and I like to be aware of what went into the piece as much as admiring the actual images that are represented.

The other problem is that the text — especially in theme books such as this one — is almost invariably lame, so I was delighted to discover that not only was the art varied and fascinating, but the text had been meticulously researched and then presented in a very readable style. The art ranges from classics through to contemporary photography and even kitsch.

Mermaids is over-sized with many of its over two hundred and fifty illustrations and photos being full-paged. It also contains a comprehensive bibliography for further reading and a handful of pure fun items such as a mermaid tattoo, a fortune-telling device and the like.

Pricy, perhaps, but if you have the money to spare, well worth it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Brief Reviews: Books

Circle of One, by Eric James Fullilove, Bantam, $5.50

IN ANOTHER bleak future where telepathy is recognized and exploited, telepath Jenny Sixa begins the book as an expensive whore and is transformed into something else by an encounter with a stronger telepath who has an agenda of his own. Soon she becomes a police consultant.

This police procedural set in a sleazy future L.A. moves between corporate crimes and some mighty strange murders. Points for inventiveness, including some interesting AI extrapolations; points for skillful writing; minus points for a fairly tired plot.

Wind from a Foreign Sky, by Katya Reimann, Tor, $23.95

Gaultry Blas and her twin sister are pawns in an evil plan to overthrow their beloved country of Tielmark. Kept in the dark about their heritage and the great magical powers they possess, the twins realize that they alone can stop the familial struggle between the Twin Goddesses who rule the country and their mother, Llara Thunder Bringer, who will stop at nothing to regain control of Tielmark. Her sister has already become a puppet of Llara's disciples, so it is up to Gaultry to thwart their plan before it is too late.

This fantasy tale by first time novelist Katya Reimann, billed as "Book 1 of the Tielmaran Chronicles" follows Gaultry on a treacherous journey of self-discovery. Reimann takes the reader to a land ruled by the Twelve Gods, who form a family as dysfunctional as the protagonist's.

Murder in Cormyr, by Chet Williamson, TSR, $18.99

You've got your indentured servant to a mostly retired, overweight wizard who loves cats; your village preparing for a visit from the Grand Council of Cormyr's Merchants' Guild; and your menacing ghostly figure swinging an axe out in the middle of the Vast Swamp. Oh yeah,

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and a couple of people get murdered.

It's up to Benelaius the wizard and his servant Jasper to seek out the clues and sort through the copious suspects, from the jealous roofer Rolf to the beautiful adventuress Kendra. With a little help from Benelaius's former apprentice Lindavar, they unravel the mystery of the murders.

Chet Williamson brings the murder mystery form to TSR's world of Forgotten Realms with fun and flair.

Ferman's Devils, by Joe Clifford Faust, Bantam Spectra, $4.99

Boddekker has a problem. Several, in fact. He's been given the biggest advertising assignment of his life — the New! Improved! washing product, Nanokleen — but he's got to come up with a killer concept for it or he and his entire design group are out of a job. His dream home in the suburbs is just out of reach unless he can get married so he and his potential descendants will qualify for a 100-year loan, but his dream girl, the infinitely desirable Honniker in Accounting, is even farther out of reach.

Then, to top it all off, he gets attacked by a street gang. But if he can play his cards just right, maybe he can turn his misfortune into the advantage he needs to edge out the competition.

Ferman's Devils is a hilarious journey into the advertising world of the not-too-distant future, when computer viruses try to sell software to their victims and a street gang holds the key to a product's success.

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Albert Cowdrey's name may seem new to F&SF, *but in fact it isn't. In the 1960s, he sold one novel and several stories, including one to us, under the name Chet Arthur. He spent the last twenty-five years working for the Army staff in Washington, D.C, and wrote eight books on military and medical history.*

Then he retired and returned to his native New Orleans where he found the inspiration for our cover story, "The Familiar." "I live alone," he writes, "in a small house whose garden contains two Foo Dogs and a gargoyle that sits on a wall. As far as I know, none of them goes strolling after dark."

The Familiar

By Albert E. Cowdrey

IT WAS AN ODD SORT OF neighborhood, even for New Orleans. I should have realized that the first time I looked from the upstairs window of my newly rented house and saw the gray rooftops rising out of the thickets of semitropical greenery like a lost city in a jungle. Or on my first walk up and down Azalea Place, when every glance into an opulent patio brought me a return stare from a mossy, mottled gargoyle.

Certainly I should have realized it was a strange place when Mrs. DeSaye called on me two days after I moved in. She was a sort of one-woman Unwelcome Wagon and she came, apparently, to empty the Dispose-All of her mind on my living room rug. Or — looking back — to give me a sense of her importance, even to make a veiled threat or two?

Mrs. DeSaye was a stout lady with bulging eyes and a metallic-looking blond wig. While I was scaring up coffee and macaroons and *biscotti* to nibble on, she told me that I had moved into a veritable nest of burglars, spies, warlocks, and adulterers. Meantime she inspected with

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voracious interest as much of the interior of the house as she could see. I gathered she had not been welcome when the owner, Angela Barberino, had been in residence.

"Oh, I know her," she said darkly, taking a macaroon. "Italian. Now, I don't say every Italian is Morpha [Mafia?] but her husband Joe had that look about him, sort of squat and he was in *casinos*. And after all, *somebody* shot into my attic on New Year's Eve, though why the hit man thought I'd be up there I don't know."

"People in this town do shoot a lot on New Year's Eve, don't they?" I put in. "They certainly did when I was growing up here. Maybe it was a wild shot."

"*Nothing ever happens by accident*," she said. "People said it was an accident the time the brick truck backed over Tom Vidakovich. Well, maybe and maybe not. He had been threatening to sue me because somebody told him I had said in the Piggly Wiggly that he was probably a Russian spy. With a name like that, what else, I'd like to know?"

I was about to say that Vidakovich was South Slav rather than Russian, but then let it pass. I had already grasped that Mrs DeSaye didn't deal in fine distinctions, such as whether one's ancestors came from Great Russia or a thousand miles to the west.

"And then he started to put up a brick spite fence along our property line. The workmen had just arrived when he had a fit of some kind and rolled into the way and the truck backed over him. So you see!"

Actually, I didn't. But a lifetime spent in and out of embassies has left me half convinced that lies are the normal coinage of human intercourse. So I grinned fatuously and poured her some coffee. I had already decided that I did not like Mrs. DeSaye. I therefore resolved to be especially nice to her, on the grand old diplomatic principle that if you don't set 'em up you can't knock 'em down.

"*Nothing happens by accident*," she repeated. "For instance, why did my Prettypuss disappear? Sure as life it was Colonel Kennedy's dog that killed her."

"Who is Colonel Kennedy?"

She looked at me with undisguised contempt. I realized that Mrs. DeSaye was so deeply entangled in the life of Azalea Place that she

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literally found it impossible to imagine that anyone, even if he had moved in only two days before, could be ignorant of at least the basic facts of the neighborhood.

"Colonel *Kennedy*," she said, "is Angela Barberino's lover. They live in the house right over *there*. It was when she moved in with him after Joe's death that this house became available for leasing."

She munched and sipped and looked at me with her large glassy blue eyes. The expression in them said again, "So you see!"

I believed I was beginning to get the idea. Since nothing happens by accident, Joe Barberino's death had been no accident either.

"And Colonel Kennedy's, uh — dog?" I queried, assuming that Prettypuss's disappearance was a related crime. I was not, however, prepared for Mrs. DeSaye's next revelation.

"Marble," she said. "The dog's made of marble. It stands in his front yard. It's — " she lowered her voice — "a Familiar."

She nodded importantly. "The dog's a demon," she said, and helped herself to a macaroon.

"Surely not," I murmured. Generally, the rule is that the crazier somebody is the more you agree with them, because disagreeing with a lunatic gets you nowhere. But there were limits. A dead Mafioso, shots in the attic, Vidakovich and the brick truck — all that I could take. But Prettypuss *eaten by a marble dog!* No. And again, no.

"It serves its master during life and then takes another one at his death. It belonged to Kennedy's wife when she was alive. A Chinese woman. Just the kind of thing you'd expect from an interracial marriage. Well, when the Colonel moved in, it was white, white marble. White as bone. I used to see it and think, What a pretty white! Well, just look it at today. It's gone *pink*."

She sipped her coffee, then noticed that I was still baffled.

"From the blood," she explained impatiently, in case I was dense, which I suppose I was. She added with surprising depth of venom, "I'll never forgive Kennedy for what happened to my cat, never."

An idea came to me. Perhaps Mrs. DeSaye herself was a kind of irritating and demanding Familiar of Azalea Place, and resented the intrusion of a competitor. I could imagine her roaring, "I'm possessing this street!" whenever another demon showed up.

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This thought was so entertaining that I pressed another macaroon on her.

"Oh, *no*," she said, eyeing it with longing. "I'm trying to lose some weight."

"You??" I said, in a tone implying that she was just short of bulimic.

"Well, perhaps one," she sighed, and started telling me about a string of burglaries in the neighborhood. "Not in *my* house, of course," she said darkly, "I have protection." I was too weary of her tiring company to ask what sort of protection a widow living alone might have that would send burglars scurrying. And I was delighted when, at last, she left.

A FEW DAYS LATER I had a chance to meet Colonel Kennedy and his demon dog. Angela, the Mafia widow, arranged it.

She was a pleasant, soft-spoken, rather busty woman in her forties with a great mass of black hair and not a streak of gray anywhere. She called on me to make me welcome in Azalea Place, and to collect my check for the rent, and after we had chatted for a while and eaten the last of the macaroons she invited me to step next door and meet her Jim.

"So you were in the Army, too," she said, mulling over a piece of information I'd given her.

"Just for a few years. Back in the Sixties during Nam. I've been in, uh, other services since then."

"Jim will be interested. He was in for thirty years and spent most of the time in Asia. He was an area expert and he speaks Chinese and I don't know what all."

Colonel Kennedy was spreading pine bark mulch in the garden behind their strong iron gate. He was tall, thin and straight, with a clipped white mustache and unsmiling tobacco-colored eyes. He had the practiced terse charm of the military diplomat and he and Angela showed me around the garden. It was a handsome place. Birds were singing, the banana trees were exhuberant and water trickled from the mouth of a bronze dragon into a little brick pond set among blooming impatiens. Fancy carp switched their flowing fins like transparent capes and a purple water hyacinth had just opened.

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Also I met the marble dog, seated in a mass of dark green groundcover. It was your ordinary Foo Dog, but a big one — nearly four feet high — and, for whatever reason, definitely reddish in color.

"Fine animal," Kennedy said, patting it. "They're legendary creatures, part dog, part lion, you know. Favorite with Ming, my wife. Her father — well, he was a grim old devil, to be frank — one of Chiang Kai-shek's secret police types. Torturer. Straight out of the Golden Horde. His father in turn had been a young idealist with Sun Yat-sen at the time of the 1911 revolution. Went bad, I gathered, soon after. This dog was made to guard the Imperial Palace and when the dynasty fell it was found in a blood-spattered courtyard. No bodies, just blood, as the old man told it."

"Oh dear," said Angela. "I wish you wouldn't tell this story."

"Well, it was bloody time. Anyway, Ming's grandpa took it away and gave it a place of honor in his home, then passed it on to his son, who gave it to Ming to protect her. She gave it to me when she was dying of cancer. The old dynasty was the Manchu Dynasty, so I call him Foo Manchu."

He smiled with straight, even teeth and I put on my usual fatuous, disarming grin. There was something about Kennedy's eyes that intrigued me. I had seen similar eyes before — flat and depthless — on professional soldiers and cops and killers. Eyes that are always taking aim.

Something was coming back to me about Kennedy himself. Common name, of course, but I had been in JAG — the Judge Advocate General's section — in Nam in 1965-66. And there had been some talk about possibly bringing charges against a brilliant young captain named Kennedy who had done something that was out of line.... I couldn't remember exactly what. And then the matter was dropped and nothing said. The time when a My Lai incident could take over the newspapers was still a long way in the future then.

I told Kennedy and Angela that Mrs. DeSaye had visited me and Angela rolled her eyes up to heaven.

"I suppose you heard all the local gossip suitably embellished with ghoulies and ghosties," she said.

"Woman's a nut," said Kennedy, beginning to spread mulch again. "Thinks she can cast spells. She used to come in here and chatter and throw out hints. I had to tell her not to come back."

"I suppose she's harmless," said Angela dubiously.

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"No, she's not," said Kennedy.

I left them in the garden with the birds and flowers and Foo Manchu standing guard, all bulging eyes and swirling mane and big sharp claws. Part dog, part lion, eh? Nice pet to have if the one nonsupernatural item in Mrs. DeSaye's list of local happenings — the string of burglaries — proved to be a fact.

As to what had happened to Angela's husband, I heard about that from Mrs. Williams. Just as Mrs. DeSaye was the block captain, Mrs. Williams was the neighborhood equivalent of CNN. Because she cleaned people's houses she knew all, and she told practically everything. The only trouble was, the gossip you wanted to hear came mixed with a lot of other information about people you had never met and never would meet.

In cleaning my house Mrs. Williams was brisk and efficient. Floors, furniture, rugs, dishes, all straightened out like idling soldiers who form rank and file when somebody in authority shouts a command. Meanwhile she talked like a radio, hardly pausing for air. I gathered that life had been unkind to her, that she had had an unsatisfactory husband and an even less satisfactory son.

"That man of mine was a *rap*scallion and I ain't surprise Derrick be such a dead loss. I beat that boy with both hands and a broomstick, but I shoulda used a flatiron on him, nothin' else be any good. But you never know how people gonna turn out, do you? Joe Barberino he was a nice man and look what happen to him."

"What did happen to him?"

"He was just a nice Eyetalian man what run the *Girl of the Golden West*. [A riverboat casino, I guessed.] Then somebody put the *grisgris* on him. He start to see snakes, roaches and so on and he wasn't drinkin' enough for that. In fact, hardly at all. I told him pray, only prayer be your shield when a witch go after you. Then one night he started in to screamin' 'Bugs! Bugs!' and flappin' his arms like crazy. Pretty soon his heart just give out. Good thing for Angela that Colonel Kennedy moved into the block just then. And now that damn old witch-bitch got him in her sights, too. Count of that cat of hers."

"You mean Mrs. — "

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"Oh, you know who I mean. Her whole life be little fights and big revenges. But this time she's makin' a mistake. The Colonel, he been to a far country and brought a friend back with him."

"What kind of friend?"

"The kind of friend everybody need these days."

Meeting Angela one day in Audubon Park — there's a regular track around the lagoon and the golf course, and everybody exercises there, slow or fast according to their abilities — I fell in beside her and puffed along, trying to keep up with her power walk.

"Mrs. Williams thinks Mrs. DeSaye is a witch — " I began.

"Well of *course* she is."

"I mean the actual hex kind and that she's brewing some of the bad stuff for your friend Kennedy."

"I think she's bitten off more than she can chew," smiled Angela and pulled away from me steadily. A mile-long alley of giant oaks overspread the walk and gray Spanish moss streamed out on a damp breeze smelling of rain. I slowed down, panting, and watched Angela disappear in the distance, a big woman still full of youthful energy and swinging her arms like Jane Fonda in her exercise mode.

That night I almost met the neighborhood burglar. I've seen a lot of bad stuff in my life and at three or four in the morning it all comes back to me. When I can't sleep I get up and walk around in the dark. I get a glass of water or milk, sometimes sit down in an easy chair and fall asleep and don't wake until morning.

I rather like darkness. It has its own qualities, when you get used to it, not color exactly, but shades and tints. I wonder sometimes if the plate I carry in my head from getting blown up in Nam has changed subtly the way I perceive light or if everyone sees much the same thing.

This night I was standing at an upstairs window looking down into my yard. The sky was overcast and dully illuminated by the reflection of the city lights and down below me the lawn seemed to exhale a kind of dim light of its own, with islands of profound darkness around the grove of banana trees and the masses of sweet olive and lugustrum. Suddenly I saw a human figure detach itself from the trees and cross the lawn and disappear into the shadow of the house. Then a sound of scratching began at one of the patio doors downstairs.

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I slipped my nine-millimeter out of a dresser drawer and padded down the stairs, feeling the cold dry metal begin to warm and get slick in my hand. Nervous? Sure. In the living room I spotted a shadow moving outside the left-hand door and thought about putting a shot into it. But that would cause a lot of trouble, one way or another, and ruin the door besides. Instead, I switched on the outside lights. For an instant a man's figure was outlined against the drapes and then it was gone, and the noise of somebody blundering through the shrubbery followed. I called 911, and two hours later the cops showed up while I was eating breakfast, made a few notes, and went away again.

Not much as urban crime stories go. But there was an old lady living alone down the block — Mrs. Vidakovich, as a matter of fact, whose husband had been at odds with Mrs. DeSaye when the brick truck backed over him. Two days later Mrs. Williams arrived to clean her house and found her lying in a pool of blood. There was a broken window and the place had been turned upside down. Maybe Mrs. V had surprised the burglar or simply had been in his way. That was an urban crime story, too, a bad one.

Mrs. V had no close relatives and she had made Angela the executor of her will. Angela arranged for the cremation and the memorial ceremony. Mrs. DeSaye wasn't invited, but I was. The ceremony was held on the deck of the Algiers ferry, with Colonel Kennedy supporting Angela while a small group of neighbors and elderly friends of the deceased shifted from foot to foot, listening to her read from the Book of Ecclesiastes, apparently a favorite with the deceased.

"Vanity of vanities," Angela cried, her voice high and clear over the thunder of the engine and the cries of gulls, "*all* is vanity."

A fresh raw wind whipped down the river and Colonel Kennedy emptied the urn and the gray ashes scattered over the glittering wavelets of the Father of Waters and disappeared. Then one of the old lady's friends said a few words, the burden of which was that violence was pointless and whoever uses the sword will perish by the sword. If that's true, I was thinking, what a lot of people I know will have to perish!

When we reached the west bank, the mourners all went to a Cajun restaurant for nourishment and a number of us got potted. Even Jim and Angela lifted more than a few glasses. I don't know where the feeling

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comes from that funerals are festivals but a lot of New Orleanians have it; it's like the jazz funeral that starts in tears and ends in a carnival. Mrs. V's friends all agreed that she had been a chipper old soul who had lived a long life and a good one and that the achievement deserved celebration, not sorrow. The party coming back was downright hilarious, and my usual siesta became a matter of sleeping off the unaccustomed noontime drinks.

A day or two later I met Mrs. DeSaye on the street and put on my usual silly grin and bade her good morning. She was having none of it.

"Personally," she said without preamble, "I do not approve of cremation or drinking at funerals." Pissed off, I thought, because she wasn't invited.

"Too bad it wasn't yours," I smiled, "so you could arrange it properly." The words just slipped out. You see, at that point I wasn't afraid of her in the least. Mrs. DeSaye struck me as silly rather than threatening.

But now she gave me a look that almost made me believe in the evil eye. Her baggy lids bunched up over those bulging pale blue eyes until the little black pupils in the center gleamed like splinters of jet.

"I'm not ready to arrange *mine*," she said.

She spoke in the damndest voice I ever heard. It wasn't any louder than normal yet it seemed to echo; I could swear I heard it echo off the houses across the street. Then she walked on, an ordinary bulbous lady on a quiet urban street. Christ, I thought, I wonder if I've just been hexed. Will I start seeing bugs, flapping my arms, having a heart attack? Or maybe run into the street and jump under a truck?

That was what I was half expecting. However, our neighborhood was somewhat oversupplied with the preternatural. Something else struck first.

A MORNING OR TWO later I was setting out for my walk in the park, hoping to meet Angela on the way, when I spotted her in her power-walking togs standing in front of her gate and staring at the ground. Her face wasn't so much horrified as paralyzed and when I hurried up to her I could see why.

The right hand of a black man was lying in a puddle of congealed blood just outside the gate. The hand was already swarming with ants. Angela,

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white-faced, fell back inside the open gate and propped herself against Foo Manchu.

"Please," she said. "Call Jim."

I hastened to the house and rapped on the door. A few minutes later, the cops notified by phone, we were all back at the gate, staring. Angela refused to look any more, but I managed to tear my eyes away long enough to note that around the Foo Dog the earth was torn up and that the statue was now a deep, lustrous red with complex patterns of purple veining.

Then the cops pulled up and after giving a statement to a polite, pudgy black detective, I went home. Next day, while Mrs. Williams worked, I walked my rent check next door with more than a hope that I might hear something more. There was a bell beside the gate and I rang, bringing Kennedy who took the check, thanked me, and proved to be in an uncommonly chatty mood.

"It's become a neighborhood sight," he said, as we stood together gazing at the fatal spot, now considerably torn up by souvenir collectors.

Angela arrived, carrying a cup of coffee, and stood by his side at the gate. Behind them golden and already hot sunlight drenched the garden; the azaleas had gone past, but the myrtles were beginning what looked to be an extravagant bloom and there was something in the air, sweet, heavy, and insinuating, that I thought could only be cape jasmine, just opening.

"They check the fingerprints on the hand?" I asked.

"That detective from NOPD called this morning to say it was some ex-felon called Derrick Williams. It's no secret. It'll be on the morning news, along with pictures of this place." He made a face. "WPRY wanted to interview me. I said hell no. Angela said the same. They wanted to know, did I have an *explanation*? I said hell no to that, too."

"Foo Manchu must have gotten him," I suggested with my slightly goofy grin.

Kennedy looked at me thoughtfully for what seemed a long time and then, a slow smile spreading over his thin lips, said, "That's what I told Angela."

Angela smiled a little uncertainly; I suppose she thought she didn't yet fully understand Jim's sense of humor.

When I got home, Mrs. Williams was sitting on the couch in tears. The TV was on and that was how she learned that the son she used to beat with

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both hands and a broomstick had had something much worse done to him. I gave her the day off with pay. I was sorry to see her in tears but I was glad that Derrick, now identified as the neighborhood burglar and the killer of Mrs. V, was gone.

A few nights later I woke up about three. After half an hour of inviting the rest that wouldn't come I got up and padded over to the bedroom window. I could see slantwise down into Kennedy's yard. Of course there was all that shrubbery and the tricky light, but I could swear Foo Manchu wasn't sitting in his accustomed place. It was like a childhood dream where things that are stable and solid in the daytime come to life after dark.

I hadn't studied Latin for fifty years, but a phrase from the Vulgate suddenly came back to me. *Negotium perambulans in tenebris* — the plague that walketh about in darkness. Only I wasn't sure whether Foo Manchu represented the plague or the cure.

Next day I was horrified to see our mailman rattling the gate next door. I ran over and caught him just as he was about to stick a package in through the bars.

"Those folks keep a Rottweiler," I told him. "You better not put your hand in there. If you've got a package for them and they don't answer the bell, better just leave it with me."

"I figured it might be a Rottweiler yard," said the mailman, a pleasant young black guy. "Somehow you get an instinct in this job. You know, people train them dogs not to bark. They just come at you."

"Just come bite a chunk out of you, eh?"

"Yeah. Over by Lurcher School, you know? Where I live? Over there it's the pit bulls. Every goddamn body got him a pit bull. They feed 'em gunpowder to make 'em mean. Well, thanks for tellin' me."

So I took the package, and later in the day carried it over when I saw Kennedy's blue Honda in the driveway. I rang the bell and he came marching down the garden path — I noticed he took regulation 30-inch steps even when strolling in his garden — and he thanked me and invited me in for coffee.

I followed him, edging past Foo Manchu. The garden was in even fuller blossom than before, and I told him, "You've done astonishing things here."

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He disagreed politely, saying, "No, it was all Angela. She's got a gift for making things live."

Inside, he poured coffee into strong brown military mugs and we sat down on rigid Chinese furniture that conceded very little to the human form. Inevitably, we chatted about the Asian war we had both been in.

"It's amazing what perfectly ordinary people will do in the right circumstances," I said cautiously. "Especially in wartime."

"I could tell you stories," he said, but didn't at first. He drank his coffee and his little flat killer's eyes, which seemed so unlike the rest of him, looked at things that were no longer there.

"I'm thinking about it more," he said at last. "Particularly at night."

"I have insomnia too — "

"No, this is worse. I must be getting old. Sometimes it's almost, well, hallucinations."

Joe Barberino saw bugs and snakes, I thought suddenly. I looked at Kennedy sharply. Was something getting past the guardian at the gate, something that couldn't be seen, bitten, or swallowed?

"I smell old blood," he said with difficulty. "You know how damnfool writers are always saying blood smells sickly sweet? It doesn't, of course, it smells like sweat. A fleshy, sweaty smell. Well, I'm smelling it in the dark, sometimes so strong it's like being in a slaughterhouse."

I told him my own little war story. "A truck I was riding in was blown up by a mine in the middle of Saigon, in the middle of the day. It happened near a market and a lot of people died, too. All I remember is the dust and the screaming and the smell of things burning before I blacked out."

He nodded. "I suppose when you were over there you heard something about me," he said.

"Something..."

"I know there was talk about bringing charges. Maybe they were justified. Once I just stood back and let the boys go. I didn't know myself what they would do. We'd had trouble with this village, and I thought, You goddamn gooks shoot us in the back, do you? See how you like this. So I let the boys go. And later when I walked through the wreckage — just like you said, it's incredible the things ordinary people will do in wartime. Mutilating children, sodomizing corpses. Things you wouldn't believe."

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He sighed. He sounded old and tired. The talk lightened up a bit after that and he showed me a couple of his scars where AK47 rounds had gone through him, and his left ear, which, when I examined it closely, turned out to be one of those sculpted ears that plastic surgeons make out of bits of living gristle to replace an ear that's been lost. I had never noticed it before.

"That changed me," he said. "After that I didn't love war so much. Come on, I'll walk you to the gate."

"Is that necessary?" I asked. "Even though I'm an invited guest?"

"Well, it's desirable. I mean, you never know. It's a living creature, you know, in its own strange way, and therefore somewhat unpredictable."

That was the only time I ever heard him say straight out that Foo Manchu was something — well, something else. It was also the last time I ever heard Jim Kennedy say anything at all.

That night before I went to bed I checked to make sure that Foo Manchu was in his place — he was — the gate locked, and the lights on in the Kennedy house. Through the garden foliage I could just catch a glimpse of Jim's white head and Angela's dark one, apparently sitting in adjacent chairs in the flicker of a TV set. I went home to bed and I was well into my nightmare — smelling dust and fire and hearing people scream — when the phone woke me a little after four-thirty in the morning.

It was Angela and she was scared. Jim was having a heart attack or something; anyway he couldn't draw a good breath. She had called 911, but would I come quick? She'd heard him say I was in Vietnam and did I by any chance know CPR?

I did, and within five minutes, clothes disordered, eyes gummy and mind still confused, I was at the gate and Angela was unlocking it for me. I kept enough presence of mind to take the key from her and lock it behind us before we started for the house. Kennedy was looking terrible; I smelled the vomit before we reached the bedroom upstairs, and when I turned up the light and bent over him I could see that his swarthy face was bluish and contorted. He was unconscious.

I started CPR, dragging him down onto the floor to work better. No response. I couldn't feel a heartbeat and he wasn't breathing. I tasted vomit every time I forced air into his lungs. Pounding on his chest got no response; he might have been a big, hard-bodied leather doll for all the

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good I was doing. The bell at the gate rang when I was a few minutes into it, and Angela retrieved the key from my pocket and ran downstairs. Almost instantaneously, it seemed, there were big young men at the door of the bedroom, and they were hustling and banging a metal litter inside. They had the electroshock gadget, the paddles, and a bottle of oxygen, and one was already poking a needle into a little vial, I suppose the stuff that dissolves bloodclots.

I moved aside for the pros, suddenly aware that an out-of-shape old geezer with a plate in his head has no business doing vigorous CPR unless he wants it done on him next. Gasping, I sat absolutely still on the rumpled bed with head down while my breathing returned to normal. I was aware of the emergency team strapping Kennedy to the stretcher and then rushing him out, a plastic mask on his face and the oxygen bottle resting beside his head. Angela thanked me distractedly and said she was going along to the hospital, and *please* take care and *thank* you so much. And then I was alone in a very smelly, quiet, strange bedroom where a man I knew and had just begun to like had died.

After a while I became convinced that I was not about to follow Jim, not yet. Pulse got down under a hundred and my muscles stopped quivering. I got up and went to the bathroom and drank a little from a bottle of artesian water in a metal stand. Light was streaming in through a bullseye window. I became aware that the sun was almost up, that a summer day was beginning, that birds were quarreling, that squirrels were leaping and cavorting in branches. It all seemed very loud in comparison to the quiet that now permanently enshrouded Jim Kennedy, who had died — of what? I wondered. A heart attack? A hex?

I made my way downstairs and out the front door, which swung to behind me and clicked. The garden rippled in a soft breeze. Suddenly I felt a small touch of apprehension. I couldn't see Foo Manchu, unless a momentary flicker of red in the green maze might have been him. Or maybe just a cardinal? I looked left and right, and the roof of my own house stood up, rising out of dense bamboo and dark yew and a summer thicket of thick-leaved Japanese magnolia. I turned back and tried the door; it had locked automatically.

I started toward the property line but met a board fence nine feet high with new metal brackets nailed to the inside holding a coil of bright

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concertina wire. So after Derrick's death, Kennedy had taken precautions to prevent anyone else from getting in. I had a strong feeling that the fences around the other sides of the property would be at least as strong and well guarded. Which meant I couldn't get out.

I looked back. The house had six ground-floor windows facing me, and every window was barred, the bars secured by one-way screws of the type you can't get out without a lock wrench and a lot of patience. The house was perfectly silent. I knew that the path was the only way out of the yard, and it led to the gate that the lion-dog guarded. I remember feeling a kind of indignation — wasn't I a legitimate visitor? Hadn't I tried to save its master?

I started down the path. They can smell fear, I was thinking, and thinking also of an old *Far Side* cartoon with a dog testing visitors with a Fear-O-Meter. So I tried to disengage my mind, thinking of Mrs. Williams's chatter, of duties to be done, of times gone by, of anything whatever except what I was doing, of the crunching gravel and the curve of the walk past the thick stand of banana trees and the pool with the fancy fish and the place by the gate where Foo Manchu stood, except that he wasn't standing there anymore. The groundcover was crushed down where the statue had been, and the stems of the plants that had been underneath it were yellowish white but the lion-dog was gone.

And the gate was locked. Angela had locked it behind her, either forgetting about me or assuming I'd have the common sense to stay inside the house until she returned. I heard a moan and it was my own voice. As quietly as I could I began to shake the gate. God, how frustrating it was, looking through the bars at Azalea Place, quiet lawns, big wooden houses, a sprinkler turning lazily, not a sign of life anywhere. Then I heard something moving in the garden growth, a soft complaint of bending shrubbery and a rustle of leaves too concentrated to be the work of the wind. I turned and started to run back toward the house, a stupid thing to do, but I was in a panic now.

I hadn't gone five steps when something the weight and solidity of Stone Mountain slammed into my back, breaking my left scapula with a brief blinding spark of pain and I fell, crushed down into the soft garden earth and lay there with my nose and mouth pressed into the tangle of stems, roots, and loam and tasting them all and waiting for death because life was over, all over for me. A hot, fetid breath beat rhythmically against

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the back of my neck and a couple of big teeth ripped my scalp and grated against the skull and squeaked on the metal plate. The blood spurted and the creature paused to lick my head with a huge wet tongue that was rough and sandpapery, like a lion's.

Then it tried several holds, moving its jaws a little each time, mumbling my head to get a good grip before tearing it off. I guess I had now given up hope, because the terror ebbed. I felt a strange and growing calm. My mind entered a dissociated state, feeling that this was happening not to me but to a man I had known a long time and liked but who was, after all, only a mask worn by the real me and that I could look through many other masks, including the bulging eyes of Foo Manchu — and for a few seconds I did, staring down at my battered old body lying under the huge paws where the purple veins were throbbing now with excited life.

I remember feeling a calm certainty that soon the old guy would be dead and that it did not matter. He would pass into the lion-dog and share in its strange life of alternating immobility and violence, and that was all right, nature involved these endless transformations and the slain of today was the slayer of tomorrow.

The teeth shifted and clamped a little tighter and I was back inside my own body, waiting for death. And then without the slightest warning the weight and the gouging fangs vanished. I heard a tremendous crash that I thought at first was thunder. Foo Manchu was gone. My lungs expanded enormously and agonizing pains shot through my chest. I was lying all alone, gasping and sobbing in the garden that Angela Barberino had made for Jim Kennedy.

It was a long time before I could move at all. It was tough, returning to myself when I was nothing but a great mass of pain and blood and dirt. But very, very slowly I did manage to raise my head a bit. I couldn't see Foo Manchu anywhere, not even in his accustomed place inside the gate. My breath came more evenly; for the second time that morning recuperation began. There was a great gap torn in the fence nearby, the concertina wire twisted and the thick boards shattered and the pieces flung around, some high into the trees. Slowly, wiping blood from my face, I crept through the gap into my own yard, emerging in a stand of banana trees that was swarming with flies and buzzing like a transformer. Beyond was my own green lawn.

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I had reached the open when I saw something that almost made me collapse again. Not ten feet away was Foo Manchu, seated in his old posture of defiance just inside my gate and glaring through the bars at anybody who might dare to invade it. Incredulous at first, I slowly accepted the fact that he was there to protect me. Somehow or other he had become mine.

YES, SAID ANGELA sadly, for a while it looked as if the emergency team at the hospital might bring Jim back, there was some response, but then he died for good, even with an injection of adrenalin into the heart. The strange thing was, the autopsy didn't show any disease; Jim had been a runner, careful of his weight, everything you're supposed to be and do. The doctors were baffled.

"They don't know everything," I assured her. I was in pretty punk shape myself, what with the body cast and my head still wrapped in bandages. Besides the broken scapula I had a bunch of cracked ribs and a cracked vertebra. But I was back from the hospital and sitting in a motor wheelchair in my living room — really mine now, for I'd just signed a contract to buy the house from Angela. My therapist had come and gone already, an energetic young black woman who, besides making me exercise my muscles, by her very presence dispensed great gulps of vitality and hope.

Angela was telling me now about Jim's will. How he had left his house to her, and she thought she would stay there, because in spite of everything she had been happy there, most of her memories of the place were good ones. She told me how Jim had added a final codocil the night he died, leaving me Foo Manchu with the brief explanation that having been in Asia I would "know better than most others how to care for this unusual artwork."

I'd never thought of him as having a sense of humor; now I recognized that he enjoyed a sly, dry joke. So at the instant of his death I had become the lion-dog's master, and the creature had gone in a flicker from killing me to guarding my property.

I had played my assigned role in the farce that followed, attributing my injuries to a hit-and-run driver for whom the police were still hopelessly looking. Angela had not yet thought to ask me how Foo

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Manchu got to my property, and the therapist at my request had helped me cover the statue with a plastic dropcloth to delay such questions. Looking at Angela, a handsome woman still, intelligent, unlucky, with nice breasts, and a streak of gray now showing in the dark mass of her hair, I was wondering if she might, in a little while, be open to comforting again as she had been once in the past, after Joe Barberino died.

"I'm so glad you're staying on in Azalea Place," she said in a kindly tone, as if she had read my mind.

"I've done my wandering. Besides, I feel I've sort of paid my dues here and might as well stay."

"I'll never forget how you tried to save Jim's life. I hope it's all right if I come over now and then with chicken soup or something."

"I won't recover unless you do," I replied gallantly. "And now let me chug along with you, down to the gate. I want to ask you about the garden, Angela. It was so beautiful when you were here, but I'm afraid it's going straight to hell under my care."

So she did, and I maneuvered my chair beside her, paying very little attention to what she said but luxuriating in her company and the extravagant energy of life all around me. When she was gone I locked my gate, turned my chair into a thicket of yellow jasmine and lifted the corner of the white dropcloth. For a few minutes I lingered in the spot, caressing Foo Manchu's stony mane. The marble was incredibly beautiful, the most beautiful stone I ever saw, deep dark purple shot through with crimson veins in patterns so complex and mysterious I could have gazed at them entranced for hours, wondering what they meant or if they meant anything at all.

"I'm glad you're mine," I told him. Especially glad because of the dreams I'd been having, which had gotten more intense in the hospital, even with the drugs I was taking. Soon, I knew, the dreams would reach the hallucinatory stage and I'd be set to follow the others who had annoyed or insulted Mrs. DeSaye. Set for my own accident or heart attack or whatever else might come out of that lady's dark universe, where nothing ever happened by chance.

I pulled down the cloth to hide Foo Manchu once again, and turned my chair. The little electric motor whined as I chugged back to the house. There I rang up Mrs. DeSaye and invited her to coffee.

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"I'm so sorry we had a misunderstanding a while back and I'd like to do what I can to, uh, repair the breach," I lied in my most sincere, diplomatic voice. Look, it comes naturally; I *was* the CIA's diplomatic liaison in Bucharest for five years.

"I have fresh macaroons and *biscotti* and some rather exciting news to tell you," I went on, laying out bait in great thick chunks. "You can come? Oh, that's wonderful. Say about two? I'll be waiting."

Yes, I thought, hanging up. And then we'll see. Godzilla versus King Kong. We'll see who rules *this* jungle. Feeling the old, half-forgotten thrill of combat, I chugged into the kitchen to prepare the coffee and lay out the cakes.

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Ray Bradbury has sold us a number of stories in the last few years. Most are now collected in his latest book, Quicker than the Eye, *released in November.*
His latest story is perfect for the start of a new year.

The Offering

By Ray Bradbury

THE TALL MAN WITH THE gaunt skeleton hidden in his flesh stepped out of the elevator on the third floor of the hospital with a resolve in his face not to be deterred. Making his way to the night nurse's desk he stood immensely quiet, cleaving the air with his resolution to make this query:

"Which of your patients has the greatest, richest, most incredible bank deposits?"

The nurse glanced up at this strange request.

"Pardon?"

"You heard me very clearly," said the tall gaunt man.

"What a strange question."

"Not strange when you think what's at risk."

"You sound like a lawyer. "

"Please," said the tall man. "At this very moment on this floor are — " he shut his eyes to count behind his lids, "at least four people, three men,

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one woman, floating out of their beds toward limbo and beyond."

"Are you a relative?"

"How can I be a relative when I don't know the name of the richest patient here?"

"Well, yes..." The nurse hesitated, one hand on the patients' listings.

"Give me that!" And before she could move, he seized, poked it with a pale finger. "*This* one?" he said. "Or *this*? Or why not *this*?"

When he saw her iris flex, his hand froze with his fingernail creasing a name at the bottom. "Ha!"

"No, no!"

"Why do you stare at this name, then? Shall I read it out? Jonathan Blake, age seventy-six, room 605. Advanced hepatitis. Income?"

The gaunt man reeled off some numbers. "Worth ten million? Seventy? Half a *billion*?"

Again, her eyes darkened.

"My god," said the gaunt man. "*That* much? Which way to room 605? Much thanks."

"You can't go *in* there!"

"I'm *there!*"

No sooner in the room which had the premonitory silence of the mortuary, than the skeleton leaning forward in the gaunt man's flesh leaned still further.

"Wake up!" he cried.

The pale victim of some germ that would soon dissolve him out of existence flicked wide his eyes in shock.

"Sit up!" was the second command.

The sick man, mostly bones and skin, convulsed as best he could, surprised yet again.

"Listen!" came the third cry.

"Doctor?" whispered the dying man.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said the gaunt visitor, speaking as through an invisible megaphone. "Answer this: Do you value your life at ten million, forty million, ninety million, *which*?"

The same discoloring of the iris, as witnessed in the nurse, revealed the correct sum.

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The gaunt visitor snorted: "Good. You are about to — " he consulted the patient's chart, " — *die*. Yes?"

"Nobody," gasped the old man, "told me!"

"So much for sickly sweet lying doctors. Some time before sunrise they will bag and mail you to Eternity Plus. That *suit* you?"

"No," gasped the old man, "it *doesn't* suit me!"

"I'll change that." The dark visitor tossed the chart on the bed. "I'm here with an offering. Since you'll be dead tomorrow, how would you like to live an extra week or ten days?"

Stricken with this small but still good news, the skin-and-bones patient could only jerk his head in a nod and lisp out an affirmative.

"Good!" The stranger reached to grasp the old man's kindling wrist and pulse. "Slow, slower, slowest. Well!" He dropped the wrist. "I am here to gift you with seven, perhaps ten, days of extra life. Not much. But when they're shoving you under death's door into night, that ten days is Eden's sunlight, mother's milk. Want the details?"

The old man, stricken, jerked his head, eyes blazing with acceptance.

"The offer runs so: Sign over your complete bank accounts, including the Swiss, half a billon or so. All, *all* of it! In return you won't have to sink into a rain-filled grave but will enjoy, hell, *love*, two hundred forty hours of fresh air and sunlight, breathing, eating, that precious stuff that melts in your mouth. It figures out at fifty thousand dollars per minute, I have no head for figures, a huge cache for every second, worth double, triple that, *yes*?!"

The old man flickered his eyelids in uncertain signalings.

"The bottom line is, are you willing to hand over all your life's stash for ten thousand extra heartbeats, out with the bad air, in with the good, morning breakfasts, twilight snacks? Are you the coward I *think* you are, fearful of gravediggers' spades shuffling earth? You *will* give me your bank, yes, to gain a few brand new children's hours? *Mmmm*?"

The old man, lost in the pale tissues of his bed, looked at his visitor, then stared at the ceiling and beyond.

"Well?" said the gaunt man, "your *answer*?"

"No," gasped the old man.

"What?"

"No!" It came in a stale gust from the dying man's lips. And again, an outburst of will, "No!"

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The gaunt man fell back as from a storm above the bed.

"You *refuse*?"

The sick man closed his eyes to read his obituary off his lids.

"I refuse," he said.

"I can't believe my ears!"

"*Hear* it," said the old man.

"Nobody has ever refused!"

"More's the pity."

"Do you know what you're saying?"

"I know, I know."

"This means absolute extinction in some few hours!"

"But with dignity."

"Death is not dignified!"

"Being dead, I will not know," whispered the old man.

"But don't you feel the cold tomb, the turbulence of worms?"

"I feel, I sense, I know," said the old man behind his white mask. "But, I will not *buy* time," whispered the old man. "I will take only what is *given* and given freely."

"Well, then!" The gaunt stranger pushed himself back with a barking laugh from the bed.

"Well," whispered the old man, "then."

"Do you know what you have done?" asked the visitor.

"I know that within a few hours the night will come and stay," murmured the old man.

"Do you *know* what you have done?" repeated the visitor.

"If you insist, tell me."

"Instead of seven or ten days, you have won two thousand, four thousand, six thousand extra days!"

"What?" the old man's eyes flicked wide.

"By *refusing* to pay, you have won another *lifetime*."

"It cannot be!"

"Is!"

"How, what, why? For God's sake, who *are* you? Peace, man, let me die in peace!"

"No, I cannot, I must not!"

The old man fixed him with a stunned gaze.

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"I thought you were Death."

"Almost."

"Are you Life, then?!"

"Perhaps."

"Which?"

"Both."

"It's got to be one or the other. You can't be *both!*"

"Why not? *You* are."

"I am *what*?"

"Life and Death. Death and Life. Under your skin: sunlight. Beyond your eyes, a boneyard. Night."

"I never thought..."

"Don't think. *Be.*"

"I *am.*"

"Yes. You are. Now."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Such bravery must have its reward. Here!" He seized the old man's hands which were immediately jump-started, leaping to escape the shocks from the gaunt man's fingers. "I conjoin with you. We fuse. From two make one. I have searched for you for weeks, months, years. Hold! *This* is my offering!"

The old man cried out. His face burst like the sun.

Moments later, the night nurse glanced up to find a young man, no more than nineteen, with a glorious pink melon face, leaning over her desk, shouting into the light:

"Recall the tall stranger who was here?"

"Yes...?" said the nurse.

"Do you know that old man who lay dying just over there?"

"...yes."

"They are gone!" cried the young man, cheeks and eyes blazing. "Together! It's New Year's Eve! Go *see!*"

The young man ran off down the hall, hands clapped to his mouth to seal his laughter.

After a moment the nurse moved to the door of the old man's room and looked in.

"Gone," she said.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Nature, Wineberry in Tooth and Claw, With a Hint of Claret

A Letter From Martha

DON'T WE all love Nature? Of course we do!!! The delightful babbling Teal-tinted brook that enters each and every one of Martha's Secure Living Estates through its Kiwi-mossy, Slate-colored, mock-rock culvert (with electrified anti-intruder grating tastefully camouflaged as a beaver dam). The rolling, dotted-with-clover-in-shades-of-Ecru, Light Loden lawns (distribution of clover flowers guaranteed to be not fewer than five per square inch), where happy children frolic (hourly rental rates for pseudo-progeny vary depending on prevalent socioeconomic circumstances in the neighborhood of your Estate). The fragrant breezes that gently stir the hand-crocheted Driftwood-hued curtains in all the identically busy kitchens (breezes by Vornado and scheduled every quarter hour, with rotation of scents varying according to minute and season — let Martha choose for you!). What a marvelous assortment of carefully packaged wonders Nature offers the individuals lucky enough to inhabit one of Martha's exclusive Residence Enclaves!

Yet don't we all long to get away from home once in a while, however perfect our little faux-marbleized, sponge-painted, bent-twig-furniture castles might be? (And rest assured that if you've qualified to live in one of Martha's Estates, you and your home *will* be perfect!) It's that longing civilized people feel to escape to some exotic location for a change of scenery. To experience all the globe's natural wonders in their unmatched (as in "clashing") magnificence. Yes, even Martha herself gets a ladylike itch

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now and then to take off my neatly pressed hand-embroidered Loganberry apron, indulge in a long, elaborate manicure (my current favorite polish is Sunwashed Seashell) to get the old cuticles clean of gardening grime and stencilling splatters, tousle my girlish bangs, assemble my extensive set of matching luggage (in Heather, Flax, and Garnet), and jet off to faraway places!

But up till this very moment, if truth be told, there's been an eensy-weensy problem with traveling to the foreign places that by virtue of historic accident happen to host many of the world's natural wonders. Even the most cultivated globe-trotter often found herself hard-pressed to maintain her *sang-froid* in the face of conditions in these so-called "underdeveloped" countries. (Personally, I think it's not so much underdevelopment as plain old laziness!)

What am I referring to? I think we all know! Uncouth, non-English-speaking natives, many with visible medical problems. Dirty, disgusting WC's lacking not only monogrammed towels but even the heated racks to hold them! Acres of tiny hovels with no sense of proportion and truly dreadful color schemes (although frequently, I must admit, looking expertly "distressed"). And arrogant Customs Officials who insist on pawing through Martha's most intimate apparel and asking boorish questions about Martha's crates of simple souvenirs (such as delightful real ivory knicknacks and archaeologically irrelevant coins, vases and statues).

If you're like me (and if you're reading this, you must be!), you've often wished aloud, "If only someone would smooth out all the little annoying difficulties associated with reaching these natural marvels and make the whole travel experience as soothing and untroubling as life on one of Martha's Secure Living Estates!"

Well, fellow creative crafters and canny connoisseurs — your wishes have been heard!

Martha is proud to announce the debut of her — of my! — Designer Nature Tour Packages!!!

Thanks to the overwhelming success of Martha's various one-gal, homey, amateur enterprises (for your copy of our most recent annual report — this year a whopping 547 pages! — please send $59.95 to this magazine), Martha has found herself in a financial position to secure absolute sovereignty over many of the world's natural treasures. And as you might have

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guessed, Martha was not content to leave them unimproved!

First off, Martha has erected the very same reliable, feel-safe, hi-tech fencing around each and every one of her Designer Natural Wonders that you enjoy in her Residence Enclaves. No natives (except for workers and decorative units personally vetted by Martha — and you know my standards!) or uninvited, lower class daytrippers will appear to disturb your peaceful meditations on all the natural beauty surrounding you. Entrance to Martha's "preserves" (quite a change from the usual jams and jellies, ha-ha!) is made directly by chartered international flights landing on Martha's private airstrips, eliminating those tiresome brushes with Customs.

Once arrived, Martha's guests will stay in the most luxurious surroundings, furnished from the choicest little country antique stores Martha could discover. (Martha has personally troweled the nubby ceiling plaster in each room and hand-painted each floor, first applying glaze to a base of color, then removing part of the glaze with a comblike tool in alternating directions). Guests, of course, will be continuously attended by a gracious staff (gratuities and cost of staff ankle-monitors included in the total package price). Then begins the appreciation of what Martha has wrought, starting with the rather unimaginative materials Nature has provided and using the most advanced biotechnology (a big hello to all those drab geniuses at Genentech!), software (love ya, Billy G.!), and construction tools (Martha's thanks to the staff of *Victory Garden* and those brawny roughnecks at Bechtel!).

Here are just a few examples:

Martha's Serengeti

Over a million hand-preened acres where each blade of grass, waterhole, tree and animal has been coordinated to provide the most serene esthetic thrills. Wildebeests now come in a handsome mix of Umber and Fawn; lions really shine in shades of Khaki and Golden Sand; cheetahs are adorably zippy in Espresso and Salmon; and the giraffes seem to love their Pale Chamois and Cocoa patterning. The elephants presented a big challenge to Martha — so much hide, and that ghastly unkempt hair! But she thinks they look just splendid now in Tapestry Blue with accents of Indigo. Perfect sunsets were another problem, but a set of orbital filters in Russet, Hot Azalea,

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Waterlily and Fuchsia did the trick!

Martha's Everglades

A flat watery plain of marshgrass, a few submerged reptiles, some Spanish Moss, and flocks of monotone birds. What could be more boring and less promising material to work with? Yet Martha was up to the challenge! Now lush groundcovers such as bunchberry and pachysandra alternate with elaborate topiary displays. Herons in Coral and Electric Pink share the scene with kingfishers clad in Emerald, and storks sporting their Copenhagen Blue with pride. And those pesky gators? Hunter Green slashed with Cypress, of course!

Martha's Grand Canyon

While not technically a foreign site, the old Grand Canyon might very well have been, what with its hordes of Winnebagos, grimy unshaven hikers (girls — those furry legs just have to go!) and flabby, Wal-Mart-outfitted families. But under Martha's supervision, the majestic grandeur of one of America's natural treasures has been restored and enhanced. Martha was holding her breath until the scaffolding came down and the painters put away their Number Zero Windsor & Newton camelhair brushes, but now I'm so happy with the results. Great swaths of Eggshell, Pueblo Brick, Vintage Rose, Maize, Olive Gray, Sea Mist, and Purple Quartz invoke dreamy afternoons spent lying in a hammock listening to the Dow Jones rise. The rental mules look charming in their Stars and Stripes motif. And the Colorado River has never worn its Classic Navy so well!

Martha's Antarctica

Let it never be said that Martha doesn't appreciate the subtlety of a basic white color scheme. (Why, in some important matters, white is my absolute *favorite* color!) But lack of imagination can masquerade as good taste, and Martha is nothing if not daringly imaginative. So that's why guests at Martha's Antarctica will discover that her little bit of the Pole has been laboriously handbatiked! That's right: wax resists in traditional Indonesian patterns have been laid down by crawling laborers supervised by aerial spotters; then an Indigo dye was applied by specially modified crop-dusters. When the wax was removed — presto! A charmingly decorated landscape resembling the finest fabric. (Upkeep after storms necessitates a slight surcharge on this package.)

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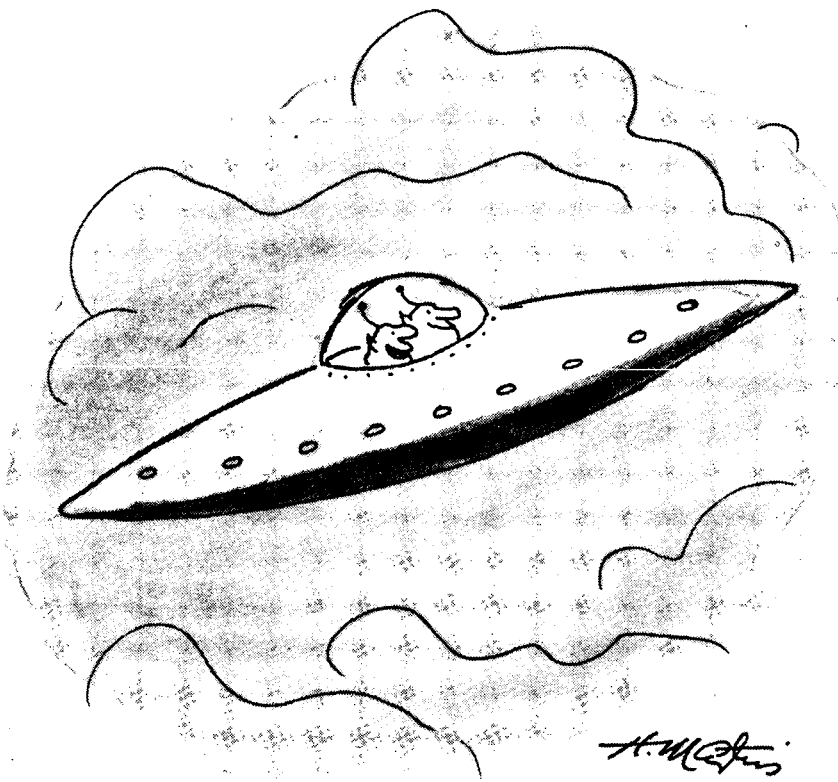
And that dour Mt. Erebus? Stripes of Mandarin Orange, Inca Jade, and Deep Lake are such fun!

* * *

Sound like your kind of vacation experience? I hope so! Remember, Martha's counting on you to buy what she's selling. And if your past behavior is any indication, you will!

And watch for Martha's Hawaii, Martha's Nova Scotia, Martha's Paris, Martha's Outback, Martha's Sahara, Martha's Siberia, and — my biggest challenge! — Martha's Mars!



"Well, I always say, it's good to get away and it's good to get home."

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Laurel Winter is evolving into one of our best writers of short fantastic fiction. She has published a number of stories in F&SF, the most recent being "The Blood Harp" in our May 1996 issue.

"David's Ashes" is a change of pace for her — a sweet meditation on life, love, and the meaning of ever-after.

David's Ashes

By Laurel Winter

COOL, SMOOTH. AMY'S fingers rubbed the urn. Rubbed so hard a bit of her warmth rubbed off. Would her fingers ever feel warm again? Or her heart?

Not heavy. Didn't seem any heavier than when she bought it, as if David's ashes were weightless. Probably floating around inside, immune to gravity, testing the lid, cracking effervescent jokes. Probably he wasn't dead at all, and the joke was on her, who had let them burn him up, him lying so still and slack and pale. And cold.

No, he was dead all right. Cold just wasn't David. No matter how jaw-cracking cold their bedroom was on the belowest zero nights of the year, no matter how icy were the feet she stuck up against him — not on purpose, but reflexively — he was always warm. Like a furnace. Like a glowing, crackling fire.

Until something happened in his heart and the fire went out.

Amy felt a horrible laugh well up. The fire went out and she lit it again. Burned him right up. The joke was so awful and so funny and so

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David that she let the laughter out, loud and long and unexpected, in the middle of the funeral. Laughter that didn't turn into tears.

It did turn heads, though. Every head in the place turned to face Amy and the urn, eyes concerned, shocked, maybe even appalled. Amy just kept laughing, almost dropping the urn that contained David, brushed stainless steel, vaguely spaceship-like in design. None of this brass, old-fashioned crap for him. Nothing that actually looked like a funeral urn.

David was the only person in the place capable of sharing the joke, and he couldn't give her the old nudge and wink and that look that sent her over the edge into hilarity at the most inappropriate times — like now. "A private joke," she said, out loud, hugging the urn, cold and hard and full of nothing but David's residue. "We apologize." She adjusted her grip on the urn and addressed it. "Come along, dear, this party is dead." More laughs, laughs, laughs. No one stopped her — them — from leaving, although several, especially her mother, considered it. She could tell from the expressions, the aborted movements, the eyes that went from "oh no" to "the poor thing, she doesn't know what she's doing" to "give her some time...."

And before anyone could reconsider and decide that she was in no condition to be alone, Amy had whisked herself and her urn off to the car.

"Doesn't a funeral procession usually consist of more than one car?" she asked David. He of course said nothing, or, if he did, the answer didn't make it through the metal. She had buckled the urn firmly into the passenger's seat. The tip of the screwed-on cap reached not quite to the bottom of the window. "I'm going to have to get you a booster seat," she said.

It was almost another joke, and she almost laughed again, and then she was crying and swerving into oncoming traffic. A horn blared, and somebody's brakes — hers? — screeched.

She pulled over next to a Dunkin' Donuts and wept until she was dried out, cried out. "Almost made it his and hers urns," she said, "except I didn't have you to pick out a good one for me. Just my mother, and she probably would have had me bronzed like a bowling trophy — or maybe something in a nice lavender." She could just picture her mother knitting matching urn cozies, with fuzzy pom-poms on top. The thought gave her a bleak smile, extra bleak because the only person she could have shared it with was toast. "Oh, David," she said, and drove home.

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At least she must have, because she found herself halfway up the porch steps with the urn tucked under one arm, fumbling in her black ripstop nylon purse for her house key. Shit, she thought, blinking. Maybe David drove home. I sure don't remember doing it.

She didn't remember anything except that David was cold and dead and turned to ash. She pushed open the door — not having realized that she'd found the key and turned it — and went in and set David on the server.

He looked marvelous there, quite the designer touch. "Maybe I'll go into the decorating business," she told the urn. "Coordinating the dearly departed with the early American living room set." Or, in their case, with the futurized antiques. The server had belonged to her great-great aunt, who had probably started rolling in her grave when Amy and David got their hands on it.

Amy's mom had tried to take it back when she found them staining it a sheer black that let the grain show through. And she'd almost fainted when they started with the silver and fuschia and teal, picking out patterns in the grain and enhancing them with tiny brush strokes: an anorexic-looking figure with big feet, a girl with three eyes playing a warped violin with her hair, a cat with a tail that became the moon. "It's obscene what you're doing to Aunt Elma's server," she'd said. "What would she think?"

But that was their secret — they figured out what *they* thought, and went from there. How could dear, old, dead Aunt Elma's thoughts have any influence on them, the living?

How could the dead have any influence on the living? For the first time, Amy knew the tenacious, sinewy grip of the dead. A two-way grip, for she was far from ready to let go herself. "What am I going to do with you?" she asked the urn.

She couldn't just leave it sitting on the server. It would unnerve her visitors, those who knew of David's deceased state. Those who didn't might think the urn was some sort of candy jar and sneak a handful of her sweetie. The living room would be just as bad, and the kitchen worse, and the bedroom...David would appreciate the sentiment, but no one else would. Maybe if she disguised the urn with a pair of noseglasses....

"Stop," she yelled to herself. "It isn't funny. It isn't funny. It isn't funny."

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But she knew that already.

Hot tea, with milk. Didn't help. Didn't hurt, though. She drank it sitting in an antique rocker — one they'd bought, because her mother flatly refused to give her any more of the family furniture. This time the sheer stain was deep violet and the gold accent painting picked out accidental letters in the grain. Mostly "s" and "c," but on one of the arms there was a string that almost made sense. "Rixl."

Amy traced the gold letters with her left index finger. Rixl. She and David had been working on the definition. *An uninterrupted thought tree.* Or maybe *eat with your fingers at a fancy restaurant.* He leaned toward verbing it, while she was almost sure it was a noun. Noun or verb, though, it didn't seem to tell her where to put David.

She drained the mug, rocking far back, so her hair brushed the ficus. Benjamin, they called him, a not-very-creative derivation of ficus Benjamina. Benjamin was their pet — even to shedding extravagantly on the charcoal gray carpet. David had taken to counting each day's fallen total. The record was twenty-seven leaves.

There were many more than that surrounding the brown plastic pot now. Since David died, she hadn't picked up so much as a leaf. Benjamin was probably going to die soon, too, since he was seriously underpotted. That had been on the agenda for last weekend. And instead, black joke number thirty-two, she had potted David.

Somehow, Amy found herself kneeling on the fallen leaves, hands strangling Benjamin's trunk, shaking the slender tree violently. Leaves showered down on her and the carpet and the rocking chair.

When she stopped, Benjamin wobbled loosely in his pot. A good half of his leaves and the top third of the potting soil littered the floor. Amy brushed potting soil from her black pants with shaking hands. "I'm sorry, Benjamin," she whispered. Brilliant maneuver; husband dies, kill the pet.

She lugged Benjamin out onto the deck, leaving a trail of leaves and dirt. The new, larger pot and a couple bags of potting soil were in the laundry room, next to a pile of dirty clothes — David's favorite shirt, which seemed to cycle through every load, straggled across the top.

Amy picked up the shirt and clenched the fabric, compressing it to the density of lead or the interior of a neutron star — or death. David's scent.

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David's residue. Even a little of David's last supper, in the form of a spaghetti sauce stain. She made her fingers loosen, with a terrible effort, and spread the shirt on the top of the dryer. She just looked at it for a moment that seemed like a year, and then she folded it carefully and set it on the shelf beside the light bulbs.

The bags of soil and the pot were not really heavy, but folding the shirt had taken some essential energy from her. Her arms and legs and every other part of her felt drained, detached. But she had to do something, so she loaded up and went to the deck, mildly surprised when she arrived without dropping anything.

Benjamin looked awful. "I'm so sorry," she said. She scooped up a couple handfuls of large gravel from around the base of a nearby aspen and put it in the bottom of the new pot for drainage. Then she ripped open one of the bags and poured it in, scooping out a hollow in the center.

Her earlier outburst had loosened Benjamin, and probably broken many of his roots, but there was nothing she could do about that now. Nothing but be extra gentle as she lifted him from the pot and set him in the hollow, listing to one side until she could fill in the sides with stabilizing soil.

The second bag turned out to be not quite enough. "Damn it, David," she said, her breath coming hard against the back of her teeth. "Why didn't you get three stupid bags?"

She looked through the sliding glass door. The edge of the server was just barely visible around the corner, but she couldn't see the urn. And then she couldn't see much of anything through the liquid that coated her eyes. Colors and shapes blurred together in swirls like the painted details on their antiques.

After a long time, Amy realized that she was crouched, her nose running, in front of the server, with David's urn held tight to her chest. "You didn't get enough potting soil," she said, her voice raw from weeping.

The urn had warmed from her prolonged contact. The top and sides were streaked with tears. "Sorry," she said, wiping the worst of the tears from the smooth silver surface with the tail of her black shirt.

Black was one of Amy's regular wardrobe staples, so she hadn't needed to buy new clothes for the funeral, just choose the nicest of her

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black pants and shirts — and argue with her mother over the suitability of wearing black Reebok aerobic shoes to a funeral.

"Don't you think a nice black dress would be better?" her mother had asked. "I could pick you up some shoes, too. Size six, isn't it?"

"No."

Her mother's eyebrows rose. "Really? I was sure you wore a six."

"No, I don't want any stupid black dress and uncomfortable shoes. Just leave me alone."

"I'm just trying to help."

"Well, you aren't."

"It's just that you aren't making very good decisions right now and — "

Amy had burst at that point. "Shut up. I lost my husband, not my brain. I will wear what I want to wear."

"Fine," said her mother, lips tight. "Go to the funeral looking like a cat burglar." She'd left then, angry and hurt, leaving Amy to murmur to the silence. "Size six is right. Sorry."

Now she knelt in her cat burglar clothes, although probably most cat burglars weren't covered with tears and dirt, and polished the urn.

The circular polishing movements loosened the lid. After a hesitation, she unscrewed it all the way and looked inside. Powdered and chunky, grayish white. David's remains felt gritty on her fingers. Darker spots appeared, and she realized she was crying again, watering the ashes. Salt rain, she thought. Like acid rain. Good thing there was nothing planted here.

Planted. Planted. Planted. Amy's hands grasped the urn carefully and carried it to the deck. Amy's hands tilted it and poured David in a thin stream around Benjamin's trunk. Amy's hands gently mixed him into the loose soil.

When David was integrated with the dirt and vermiculite, Amy took the urn over to the spigot, filling it about halfway with water. She swirled it carefully to clean the last dust of him from the sides, and poured it into the new pot. "Damn," she said then, realizing she should have moved the plant back in, first, before it was heavy with water.

Nothing to be done about that now, though. She lugged it into place behind the rocker, only just managing not to slop muddy water onto the carpet.

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"There you go, Ben-David," she whispered, letting her fingers trail down the trunk, touch a brown-edged leaf. "Hope that's better." Only one more thing to do, one more touch that would have tickled the dear departed.

When her mother came, Amy was half asleep in the rocking chair. The urn, minus its top, sat on the cherry coffee table they had painted with tiny, psychedelic cherries, filled with some of the flowers friends had sent when David died.

FOR SOME TIME, it appeared that Ben-David was doomed. Repotting, after all, was in itself a traumatic event for a plant. Add the shaking and attempted strangulation.... Leaves fell like dry rain.

Amy bought a hygrometer, not trusting herself. "I'd probably water you to death," she told Ben-David, bending over the pot clutching the hygrometer's slender metal spike. "Don't worry, this shouldn't hurt much."

Still wearing all black clothes that hung on a newly slender figure. "The Dead Spouse Diet," she said to a friend who had complimented her on losing weight. "You either blimp out on Häagen-dazs or you forget to eat and the model agencies are wooing you." Another comment unappreciated. Black clothes, black humor, bleak heart.

Days passed, weeks, and she began to feel less as if she had a metal spike stuck through her. And new leaves crept to the tips of Ben-David's branches and flared green.

She talked to Ben-David all the time, telling it/him/them about her latest desktop publishing project — "This brochure for a cryonics firm — you know, the people that freeze you when you die so in the future they can cure your whatever and bring you back to life. People are really getting weird. We should have taken a bigger life insurance policy out on you. Then I would only take on sensible jobs, like designing résumés for cats who are going through a midlife career change." About her mother's new hobby, matchmaking — "She thinks I ought to spend time with someone who's alive." About whatever — "I still think rixl is a noun. Something like the state of being happily disoriented, but not quite. Joyful disorientation, on steroids."

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She was sitting in the rocking chair with her feet up on the cherry table. The urn held a feathery arrangement of dried grass now, with one magenta silk orchid as a focal point. Ben-David's leaves caressed her face when she leaned back. "Joyful disorientation, on steroids," she said again. "I think that might be it. What do you think?"

Ben-David, as usual, said nothing.

"I will take your silence as an assent," she said.

Ben-David dropped two leaves on her forehead.

Amy's eyes popped open. She twisted sideways in the chair, one leg over the arm, so she could look at the ficus. It was hardly shedding at all these days — it seemed awfully coincidental that two leaves had just happened to fall directly on her head just as she was talking to it, and taking advantage of its silence in the conversation. Communication? Not highly likely, but....

"Let's try that again," she said. "A controlled experiment. If you agree with me that rixl is a noun meaning joyful disorientation, on steroids, drop one leaf. If you disagree, drop two leaves. If you are just a dumb plant, don't do anything." This was stupid, ridiculous, ludicrous — ludicrous on steroids — but her breath came fast and shallow. She held her open hand under one the graceful branches.

Two leaves dropped into her palm.

Her fingers closed over them. "Are you really there?" she whispered. "One leaf for yes, two for no."

A single leaf twirled to the floor.

Amy's thoughts twirled in her head. It wasn't possible she was cracking up ohmigod he was here. "Oh, David," she said, stroking the smooth trunk with shaky fingers. "If you're not there and this is some sort of random occurrence I will be so mad at you." She gulped. "I'm mad at you anyway, for dying like this," and she meant it, "and leaving me alone with all these boring people who have plain brown furniture and don't talk to their plants."

It wasn't easy to talk to a plant. Rather, that part was easy; what was tricky was getting the plant to talk back. Yes and no questions depended too much on the psychic abilities of the talker. An alphabet code — with one leaf for "a" and two for "b," etcetera, would have the poor tree

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denuded halfway through the first message, especially if it was a reminiscence about the time they went to the zoo and fed the wildebeests.

A yes-and-no alphabet combination worked, kind of, with Amy going through the alphabet and Ben-David dropping a leaf when she got to the right letter, but it took forever, especially if a leaf was stubborn and didn't fall until the appropriate letter was past. Then there was the problem of where did one word end and the next begin.

It made a person feel pretty stupid, Amy discovered, to have an argument with a plant. "'I'? How could it possibly be 'I'? The last two letters were 'O' and 'U.' Tell me one word that starts with 'oui.'" A sudden thought. "Are you spelling, "oui," as in French?"

Two leaves, their standard signal for no. Amy sighed. "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J — " a leaf. "'J'? 'OUIJ — " Her mouth dropped open. "I get it. I'm an idiot. Maybe you are too, because I don't see how you can use a Ouija board without fingers, but what the hell. I'll go crazy if we keep this up." She saluted Ben-David. "I'm off to Tar-zhay, since my mother would never let me have a Ouija board when I was a kid and therefore I don't have one conveniently stashed in the attic. I should get Letterman's job. I seem to talk in monologues now, since you're not holding up your end of the conversation."

She hadn't been out much lately, just the post office and a few clients and brunch with friends the previous Sunday. (It was hard not to tell them, but then she'd never been fond of straight jackets, so she refrained.) Target seemed so gloriously mundane that it gave her a light-headed feeling to be there with the intent to purchase a Ouija board for communicating with her dead husband who was now embodied in their pet tree.

Ouija boards were cheap. Of course, she thought, perusing the other "games." They didn't have interactive videos or electronic displays. They didn't need batteries.

Just fingers, which seemed like a problem to her, but hey, it was David's life insurance money: if he wanted to use it to buy a Ouija board, that was his decision.

At home, she set the board next to Ben-David's pot and placed her fingers on the planchette. "Okay," she said. "Ready when you are." Nothing happened for a moment and then the planchette slid under her quivering fingers, crashed into the side of the board, and stopped.

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Ben-David dropped a single leaf, which drifted down and fell on the carpet, half an inch from the board.

"I get it," Amy shouted. She tossed the hokey little plastic pointer to the side and lifted the board until it was only a couple of inches below Ben-David's leafiest branch. A leaf fell on "D," then another on "A." "V." "D-A-V-I-D-L-O-V-E-S-A-M-Y."

"Yes! Docking is completed. We have lift-off. Beam me up, Scotty! We are communicating!"

It was not perfect. Amy's arms grew tired, holding the board up close enough so the drift of air didn't affect accuracy. She had to rely on memory for the order of the letters, since her hands weren't available for writing, and if Ben-David went fast or the message was long, sometimes she screwed up. She always won arguments, though, by taking the board away whenever she got irritated.

She tried setting the board on the low cherry table but that was not significantly better than having it on the floor. "We need height," she told Ben-David. "I don't think even the dining room table would do. Maybe one of those café tables that you need stools to sit at...I bet the place on Campbell Street would have something." The pain that had been retreating over these last weeks hit her full force. David was not going to pull up Benjamin's roots and walk into Antiqua — or any place else — with her ever again.

She stared at the ficus tree with tear-blurred eyes, the delicate branch tips and curled-edge leaves fuzzing into amorphous green. Anger touched her again. "I'll be gone for a while," she said. "Don't — " Don't what? *Have any wild parties without me? Go anywhere?*

That was it, she realized. Even in the midst of the odd logistics of holding a two-way conversation with a plant, she was desperately afraid that David's "mission" or whatever the hell you might call it, would be fulfilled and he would leave her. Again. For good.

"Don't overdo it on the carbon dioxide," she finished lightly. "I'll be back soon." She automatically blew a kiss in Ben-David's direction, exactly as she would have sent one toward her husband before he died. Not for the first time, she began to worry that she was seriously deranged.

Working on the marble-topped café table, with its scarred mahogany legs, was painful and soothing at the same time. The even strokes painting

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on the caustic stripping solution, watching old varnish bubble. The fumes stung her eyes, gave her an excuse for occasional tears. This had always been her job anyway, too much for David's hypersensitive nose. The gritty work of sandpaper and steel wool. Frustration built in quickly, only there was no patient David to hand it off to after the first few strokes. She was doing this for him, not with him. And when she consulted with him on the colors, once the thing was denuded, he simply wrote "all."

"That's helpful," she muttered, wiping sweat from her forehead with a grimy hand. Her clothes were stippled with wood dust, more grayish-brown than black. Greasy hair straggled out from under her bandana. Two clients had been calling, polite but concerned — everyone, including her mother, had been polite but concerned with her lately, giving new fuel to the seriously deranged possibility — wondering how she was coming on their projects. "A little hardware problem," she'd told them. "Should be up and running soon." She couldn't tell them the hardware problem she was working on was a plant/ouija board interface. And that the plant had given her carte blanche with color.

"All colors. Great — " she stopped. "A rainbow. David, you're a genius." She clattered downstairs and brought up all the leftover stains and paints. But how to put it on? David had been the detail man, accurate with a fine-haired brush. She was the splash and slosh type herself. If only you could do batik on furniture, or tie dye. Ah!

She clattered down again and came up with a huge ball of every string — of whatever dimension and composition — that had ever entered the house, knotted together and rolled by David the packrat, who had insisted that someday they might need four thousand feet of string for who knew what. She began wrapping the legs in strange spirals, leaving parts of the wood bare, staining, rewrapping in a slightly different pattern, using another color.

It took days.

Some strings she didn't take off, leaving the variegated lengths stuck to the wood, to become a permanent part under the clear lacquer finish. She splashed stains across the marble top as well, drops and drips and dribbles, pools that she let soak in vividly and completely, and others that she wiped up in seconds, barely tinting the white surface with its natural black and gray pattern. It was stupid, she knew, to be so obsessive about

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color when the only really important thing about the table was its height, but then the whole thing was stupid. Insane. Bizarre.

As soon as the marble was dry, she set the Ouija board on top of it and moved it directly below Ben-David's branches. The first word spelled out by falling leaves was "STINKS."

Amy laughed. "It does, doesn't it? I didn't know plants had noses." She opened the sliding glass door wider and slid up all the dining room windows for cross ventilation. What she had just said tickled her brain. Plants didn't have noses, although they probably could sense air quality through their leaves as they were taking in carbon dioxide, but how did Ben-David see? It took some sort of visual sense to distinguish the letters to drop leaves on. And how did a plant hear her voice? Her own private theory on the fact that plants thrived when people talked to them was that they liked the extra CO_2 from all the hot air, that it didn't matter what you said or the tone you said it in.

There was something dangerous and important in this line of speculation, and she purposefully put it out of her mind. "That better?" she asked.

A leaf fell on "YES."

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, Amy spent most of her time on a stool pulled up next to the rainbow table, talking with her dead husband until her butt was sore and Ben-David had lost most of his leaves. Being dead was like being stuck in a snowdrift, David told her, only not knowing if you'd ever get out. She shared all the black jokes she had come up with, watching his branch tips quiver with silent mirth.

On Monday, Donna from Piece-of-Cake called, asking again about the conference brochure. She could apparently tell from Amy's awkwardness that not only was it not done, it hadn't even been started. Her friendly voice hardened. "If you're not going to get it done," she said, "I don't want bogus assurances. Just tell me and I'll get someone else."

Amy's face heated up. "I'll have it for you by Friday, camera ready. Is that soon enough?"

"I guess it will have to be. See you on Friday then." Click.

Amy set her phone down just as firmly. "Don't they know I'm trying,"

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she hissed, knowing even as she said it that it was a lie. And how could they know, even if she was, because the only "person" she had talked to lately was a disembodied dead guy masquerading as a plant. Again, she shied away from her thoughts, uncomfortably aware that they were leading her toward painful knowledge.

She looked toward Ben-David. "Well, it's off to the salt mines," she said. "Unless you want to get a job in a lobby somewhere." She scooted the haunted ficus into her study. The computer keys were dusty, tangible proof that she'd been neglecting her job. She powered up her system with a flick of a rainbow-stained finger and sat down.

It took a few minutes to get her mind into work mode, but then the brochure started coming together. She borrowed the rainbow idea from Ben-David's table and drenched the borders with wild swirls of color; not like anything that Piece-of-Cake had used before but not incongruous with their image. She played with different fonts until she had just the right one, blew up the conference title into 102 point type that took it from one margin to the other at a diagonal and selected rainbow swirl as the font fill. It didn't stand out enough until she had also given it a heavy black outline.

When she finally looked up to check the clock, four hours had passed. "I'm sorry," she said to Ben-David. "I guess I just got lost in my work. And poor you sitting there without a kind word tossed your way."

It wasn't exactly easy for a plant to get someone's attention unless it was close enough to rain leaves down on the someone. Amy tried it the next day while working on text lay-out, and it drove her crazy to have the ficus breathing down her neck and the rainbow table scooted up next to the printer. Occasionally, Benjamin — not David — dropped random leaves which meant nothing other than "I am a ficus. I am shedding." It was impossible to tell the difference without getting into Ouija talk, which interrupted the flow of ideas. And even when it was David, the conversations chopped up her work day.

On Wednesday, she moved Ben-David back into the living room. "I just have to get this done," she said.

David didn't drop a leaf.

She delivered the completed brochure late Thursday afternoon, after printing it out at LaserWorks Printing. Her business wasn't big enough yet

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to afford a color laser printer. That was on the agenda for next year. Had been anyway, before David's death. It still could be, if she got her act together and didn't lose all her clients. "Sorry," she told Donna, who wore three jade earrings in one ear and a single diamond post in the other. "I haven't been the best since — " Since David died? Or since he came back as a plant?

Fortunately, she didn't have to finish the sentence. Donna gave her hand a quick squeeze. "Well, you're back on track now with this gorgeous piece of work. You're so creative." That was a compliment coming from someone who regularly had at least three distinct hair colors and could wear pink with red and look as if it were meant to go together.

"Getting there, anyway," said Amy. "Call me the next time you need something done."

On the way home, she pulled in at The Blue Moo to have a drink. Only one, since her designated driver — David hardly ever drank — was now potted. Bitterness welled up inside her, hardly the reaction she'd expected after turning in a dynamite project. She wanted to have another drink, a whole slew of them, enough to float home, but her conscience wouldn't let her. Nothing would induce her to drive drunk and risk killing someone. Another small voice within her said, "Dope, that's what cabs are for."

She got very drunk.

Not falling down. Not forget-your-name-and-address. Not stupidly libidinous. Just drunk. Contemplative. Maudlin. The whole "why'd you have to die and what's going to happen to us now that you're a goddamn plant?" schtick. She couldn't imagine making love to a tree. Or not making love to anyone ever again. Or letting go of David. All of which made her very confused, which was not surprising, given the toxic condition of her synapses.

The bartender gently suggested he call her a cab when she was hunched over the counter, crying in her beer, like a character in a country song. "Okay," she said, very carefully hauling herself to her feet. "That's a very good idea. A very good idea." She started to recite her address.

"Don't tell me," he said hastily. "Tell the cab driver."

By the time the cab came, some time later, the cool outside air had sobered her up a tiny bit, but certainly not enough to drive.

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"Honey, I'm home," she said, after paying the cab driver and fighting with the key for a while. Ben-David stood silently in the dark living room. "What the hell am I doing?" she asked herself, starting to cry again. She was too drunk to even attempt to read the leaf answer. Unsteadily, she went down the hall to their — her, dammit — bed.

WAKING UP in the morning was a bit of a trick. At times like this, Amy hated what they'd done to the massive oak headboard. Waves of blue in shades from green to gray followed the grain of the wood, a wild and chaotic ocean that seemed to revolve about several points when one was hung over. She groaned and closed her eyes and tried again later.

After several such laters, she straggled out to the living room and lay down on the floor near Ben-David. Even the thought of the rocker made her queasy. She didn't look at the multi-colored table either, staring instead up at the sparse canopy of leaves. The few days she'd spent intensively working had not been enough to replenish the ficus. "We've been talking too much," she said. A single leaf fell in assent.

She didn't say anything for quite a while, sorting slowly through her thoughts. "Don't answer," she said. "I just want to say this first. You said death was like being stuck in a snowdrift. Maybe that's because you are stuck. Only you're not stuck, you just think you are. I just think you are. I mean, how could you hear and see me if you were really living through Benjamin? It's not like he's got eyes and ears. That's you. I think you just think you're tied in with Benjamin. Your ashes are, but I bet you could go and — and do whatever dead people do. I could get a life and you could get a death."

Two leaves fell right in her face.

"I said to let me finish." Her voice caught in her throat. "All we're going to do this way is kill Benjamin. I feel bad enough about almost strangling the poor creature. And what's my mother going to think if I start showing up at family reunions with a ficus tree? What's she going to have for grandkids? Saplings? I think you should go be dead somewhere else. Get on with your death. I love you, but I don't think it's supposed to be this way." She closed her eyes for a few seconds to force the tears back inside, then she rolled over onto her knees and got up to brush the Ouija board clear of fallen leaves. "Okay, you can talk now."

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Nothing. Not a leaf. Panic squeezed her lungs. She hadn't meant go without saying goodbye or arguing about it or something. But he was just thinking or something, because after a minute, leaves began to fall, slowly.

"CLICHE. BUT YOURE RIGHT. RIXL."

"What the hell does that mean?" she asked.

"YOU DECIDE," was the answer. "BYE. FOR NOW. WILL CHECK BACK LATER."

She just stood for a long time, holding the trunk of the ficus with the tips of her fingers. Rixl. Definitely a noun. *I'll always remember you but I won't let it destroy me. On steroids.* And what did he mean about checking back later? Was he going on vacation? They never had seen the Grand Canyon or Hawaii or — lots of places David wouldn't need airfare to see now. "Rixl, babe," she said.

She made the front of her sleep shirt into a pouch and gathered the fallen leaves. Letters. Words. Messages from the dead. To be kept on the shelf in the laundry room with David's unwashed favorite shirt. While he was gallivanting about and she was figuring out how to be alive all by herself.

Rixl. She guessed it could be a verb after all.

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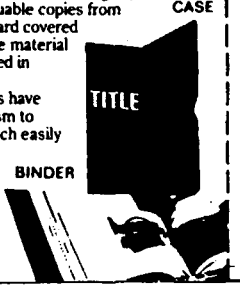

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Rand B. Lee comes from a writing family. His father, Manfred B. Lee, co-authored the Ellery Queen detective stories. Rand has continued the tradition, selling his short fiction to Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *and* The Year's Best Science Fiction, *among other publications. He last appeared in* F&SF *in September, 1993, with a creepy sf story, "Still Life with Doves."*

"The Pearl" is, on its surface, a shocking fantasy tale, but at its heart it is about what makes us human. And for these reasons, it is one of the best short stories we have ever read.

The Pearl

By Rand B. Lee

ON A FRIDAY EVENING NEAR the end of May, at twenty minutes past eleven, Joe Cantrell put the finishing touches on his suicide outfit. His apartment was a third-floor walk-up right above the Mary Street Bar and Grill, which had always suited Joe fine, since it made a convenient place to interview his clients. Until recently. Recently, his luck having rather spectacularly run out, he had decided to call everything quits.

From the first he had known he would wear black. He considered it the most tasteful color to be found dead in. But he had dismissed black leather as too obvious. He had settled on a recycled ribbed tire-rubber body suit set off by very dark green hip-waders, fancied up with a few dangly marital aids and a bright scarlet bandanna knotted at the neck, where the needles would go in. Dressed, he observed his reflection admiringly in the second of his three full-length bathroom mirrors, flexing, posing, readjusting his basket, flexing and posing again. Music and laughter from the downstairs bar accompanied the routine.

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It's not, he thought to himself, *as though I wouldn't have had a few good years left in me.* He was a muscular black-haired man in his early thirties, of medium height, skin medium-white (grimed rather than tanned), jaw medium weak, shadowed by a dark beard kept meticulously trimmed. His deep, warm eyes were all in all his best feature, unless you counted what he called his DNA delivery system, which he possessed in lavish proportions.

The other thing Joe Cantrell possessed in lavish proportions was the latest strain of human immuno-deficiency virus, copulating merrily within his blood. That he had known for some time. But several weeks back Joe had noticed his first sarcomas: several livid pseudobruises on his upper inner thigh, where (considering his line of work) he could not afford them to be and could not cover them with makeup. He had had their nature confirmed: the report-sheet from the local free clinic lay on the kitchenette table where he had placed it carefully that morning before shooting up and going to bed.

When the overworked clinician had told him the news, the first words out of Joe's mouth had been, "Minnie, Minnie, tickle a parson," one of the many biblical references with which Joe's childhood was weighted. The clinician gave him a talk on the treatments available, but by that time Joe had made up his mind.

"Let's roll!" announced Joe to the mirror, like the man in *All That Jazz.* Shouldering a drug-stuffed overnight bag and jiggling his marital aids, he took a last look around the apartment. Except for the bathroom mirrors and a Divine poster, it was almost militarily spare of furnishings. He wondered who would live here after he was gone, and if his ghost would haunt them. "Please, Lord, may it be a couple of Mormon missionary youths," he quipped, then he kissed his reflection good-bye and shut the door behind him without locking it.

Down the stairs he bounced, feeling almost free, down the stairs and to the right and down the stairs again. The bar music got louder as he descended. No looking back for Joe Cantrell. He had not looked back when he left his parents' house at fifteen and he did not look back now. He wondered how his sister Delsie was; he would have liked to have seen her again. But she had wed and bred dutifully within the faith, pleasing their parents, and though she had tried keeping track of him through

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his moves (Salt Lake City, Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Key West, San Francisco) the letters had finally stopped coming. *Like me,* thought Joe.

Walking out of the building, he was lashed by noise from the open door of the bar. The front windows were gridded; Joe liked to tell his clients it was to protect the street gangs from the customers. Joe was known for his ability to put his customers at ease. He wondered briefly if he should go inside and say good-bye to some of his acquaintances, who had always seemed to him like characters in a 1969 urban losers movie. Big ugly kind Eubie would be bouncer tonight; big handsome vicious Sam would be tending bar; big motherly corroded Alexandra Marie would be waiting tables. Joe felt as close to Alexandra Marie as he did to anybody. They had shared needles and broken like-affairs. He wondered if she had given AIDS to him, or if he had given it to her; then he considered his sexual history and broke into a disgusted guffaw. No matter now. He had begged her repeatedly to change her name, which had always sounded to him like a drag queen's stage moniker.

Some sailors lounging at the entrance to the bar sent whistles his way, but he ignored them. It was his night; no time for business.

He knew where he would do it. He turned left onto Fifth, where the street hustlers hung out. They called to him from their stations: "Yo, Joe." "Hey, *pobrecito.*" Mocking: "Howzaboutafreebee, Joe?" He knew them all: Delores and Bobby and Cowboy and Gino Mongo. They liked him because he shared drugs with them; they envied him because he had a Protector (Maurice Callander himself, the sadistic little bastard) and worked off the Escort Line in his own apartment. He supposed there was something picturesque about the street boys' despair, and he wished now he had given that interview to the silly cow from WAXL. "The Dark Side of the Street," the series had been called; very daring. "Hey, Cowboy," he replied. "Hey, DeeDee, looking good tonight."

"Where you off to in such a hurry, Josephine?" This was Gino Mongo. "And what you got in that there bag?" He loomed up out of the shadow, all six feet seven of him.

Joe did not break his stride. "Paytime for Mister Maurice, Ginny," he called to him. "We can't keep the old fart waiting, can we?" Gino barked humorlessly, but stepped back. Maurice's name was still good for

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something. *That's all I need,* thought Joe as he moved away. *To get stabbed to death on the way to my own suicide.*

Resisting every impulse to clutch his bag closer, Joe Cantrell moved on down Fifth, past all the whores, south to Arcady where the pool halls clustered, west to bombed-out Nolan and south again to Magister. There were a lot of people on the street, enjoying the brief spring cool; in two weeks it would feel like the height of summer. Halfway down Magister, he caught his first sour whiff of water and, almost simultaneously, a quick muted burst of small-arms fire. People scurried and ducked, but the trouble was some blocks away, back in the direction from which he had come. In a moment the normal pace of the night resumed. Suddenly Joe found his heart racing and his breath laboring. He was anxious, now, to get it over with.

One block west again to Riverside, a quick detour down an alley to avoid a gang parley, and he was upon the entrance to the cul-de-sac almost before he realized it. Brownstones looked down on him from all sides, like bystanders at an accident site. The Church Of Our Lady Of Perpetual Mercy lay at the end of the little street, its stone walls overshadowed with massive arbor-vitae, its wrought iron gate gaping. In the neighborhood it was called "The Church Of Our Lady Of Perpetual Misery," or just, "Perp Miz" as in "You look like Perp Miz warmed over, girl." Joe sidled through the gate and picked his way across the rubble-strewn yard. It was very dark, the street lamps in the neighborhood having taken wing, and twice he stumbled. By the time he rounded the corner of the church and barked his shins on the first of the gravestones, he was weeping uncontrollably.

He had not expected this. He paused to wipe his face. *Come on, Josephina,* he thought. His tears stopped and his vision unfogged. The gravestones leaned like drunks. What moon there was barely limned the marble of the dry fountain, but it was enough for Joe to avoid running into it. He set his bag at its foot and looked up at the church wall.

The Virgin was there. Somehow, the folds of Her veil had gathered up the moonlight. He could see Her clearly: the tip of Her excessively Caucasian nose, the slight smile on Her untroubled Caucasian lips, the pale Caucasian eyelids downturned, watching the Caucasian Babe at Her Caucasian breast. The muscles at the base of his spine started to relax. He

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nodded to himself. This was how he had always wanted it: a white death, white as snow, while dressed in black.

He sat down at the base of the fountain beside his bag and opened it. From it he extracted the drugs and the syringes. He loaded the hypodermics and lined them up on his black-rubber lap. There was a cricket somewhere; otherwise the graveyard was still. He picked up the first needle.

When he had completed the injections, he put the syringes back in the bag, put the bag down on the ground, lay back against the fountain, put his hands in his lap, and looked up at the Virgin. Having been raised Mormon, he had never had any particular feeling for the Mother of Christ beyond the vague feeling that she was the epitome of the good obedient Mormon mom, keeping herself pure so that the little incipient godlings of this world might take inspiration from the little godling to be born through her. Then he thought of Brother Oral, the Stake President, preaching in front of the auditorium at the Saints Alive! Conference when he was nine. As a child he had worshipped the ground Brother Oral walked on. Brother Oral had taken kindly note of this, and had made the best of it. He had never tried to tell his parents. He had not even thought to.

He could no longer feel his feet. His legs were gone, a melting dream. He was cold. He could not raise his arms to hug himself, so he kept his eyes on the Virgin, who smiled down at him unceasingly, or maybe just at the noshing Baby. He was beginning to fade into her face when the pain began.

It took him by surprise. He had thought he would be too out of it to feel any pain. But it stabbed so fiercely up from the left side of his chest that it made him gag, filled his mouth with the vomit taste of fear, stabbed out from someplace in the center of his heart, squeezing his lungs flat, popping his eyes. His sole goal became to get a breath, get a breath, get a breath. *This is ridiculous*, he thought. *I'm a suicide. What am I trying to breathe for*? He found he could not stop trying. Dimly he became aware that he had slipped from a sitting position and was lying on his right side in his black rubber suit at the base of the fountain. He realized with a small cold clarity that he was having a heart attack, and that the drugs were paralyzing his respiratory system. *Please God Mary Christ finish it oh God don't let them find me like this!* It also seemed to be getting darker, which he assumed was because he was going blind. He tried to remember what he had loaded the syringes with.

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And then the pain stopped, as though someone had flipped a switch. He opened his mouth and breathed, full breaths. It was wonderful. He felt wonderful. He sat up. Everything was still dark, but he could breathe and laugh and move, and he felt wonderful, though it was awfully hot. He had not noticed how hot it was getting. It was unbearable. He got to his feet and began unzipping his outfit. He found that he could unzip himself from head to foot, unzip the whole thing, head and neck and torso and marital aids and hips and hip-waders and feet, everything, unzip the whole thing and toss it aside so that it fell, dead mouth open and white face staring, at the foot of the silent fountain beneath the Virgin's silent gaze. It was not as dark as before, either. There was a light coming from somewhere above, not from Mary and her sucking Babe, but from higher up, gentle, watery, nacreous.

He began to see, very clearly, the outlines of the gravestones. They were glowing slightly under the watery light. DEUSDEDIT JONES, REQUIESCAT IN PACEM. 1899. MARY ARBUTHNOT JONES, BELOVED WIFE AND DEVOTED MOTHER, LAID TO REST APRIL 17TH, 1920. He could read every word. Stepping lightly from gravestone to gravestone, he traced the carvings with cool, deft fingers. ADDISON ENGLISH, DEACON OF THIS PARISH. MOTHER OF ANGELS PROTECT US. SARAH MINOR. GEORGE MINOR. VIRTUE MINOR. "That makes two of us, Honey," he exclaimed, and burst out laughing again.

He wandered away from the church, out of the cul-de-sac and onto the street. It was deserted. He wondered what time it was. He felt lighter than he had felt in years. The glow seemed stronger over the river, so he headed that way. This end of Riverside was mostly warehouses, row after row of them: Acme Fisheries, Dolan Packing Company, Stateline Lumber. Between the hulks of them he spied dark water glimmering. He kept walking, the wind blowing sweetly, coolly through him.

THE NIGHT after Oral had informed him he was getting too old, Joe had turned his first trick, as much for solace as anything else, but the man had insisted upon paying and that had felt good to Joe. After Oral he felt he had it coming. Five weeks later he celebrated his fifteenth birthday and the next day he was on a bus to Albuquerque. He scored in the bus station, and

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later in some bars. Soon he was robbed, then beaten up, then arrested. It was the first time he had ever been arrested and they sent him to a juvenile holding facility. Because he was beautiful, he was raped and beaten, then pitied, befriended, and protected. There he learned to rape, beat, befriend, and protect in his turn, but he never did learn pity. The police eventually found out who he was and they contacted his parents. "We are going to contact your parents today," said the man who came to talk with him once a week. The next day the man was back with a funny look on his face, and Joe knew he would never be going home again.

From Albuquerque he went to Denver, where a whore named Joepye took him under her wing and explained to him the benefits of professional patronage. Her boyfriend Beau taught him about free weights and cocaine. He tried to land some legitimate work, but he was too young and the pay was lousy. In Denver he spent his first birthday away from home. He went into a church and sat there in the dark; then he went out again. At a bar he met Jerry, Jerry The Wig Guy the whores called him, because he owned a bunch of wig factories and boasted that in some distant past he had been Wigmaker To The Stars. Jerry fell madly in love with him and asked him to move in. Joe agreed.

Jerry had a lover already, a black queen named Maxx ("With two exes, Honey, and more to come"). Joe acted as their houseboy. He had real duties other than sex and (to his immense surprise) a real salary, which Jerry paid him in cash, most of which he blew on coke. He found Jerry sweet and sad and undemanding, but he developed a huge crush on Maxx, whom he found utterly unsentimental, utterly unjealous, and utterly without shame of any kind. Maxx liked straight razors, not to hurt people with, just to collect and polish and hold up to the light and occasionally wear. During his stay with Maxx and Jerry, Joe learned to cook, clean, and chauffeur. At Jerry's frequent glittering parties he learned silent smiling politeness. He learned to answer the telephone:

"Sinkevich residence." He learned massage. When he asked Jerry idly if he could open a bank account in his own name, Jerry said, "You need a residence to do that and you cannot use any of my addresses or someone will find out and I will lose everything." So one thing Joe did not learn was how to save money.

Joe was with Jerry and Maxx for two years. He did everything he could

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to please them since he could not open his own bank account, and by the second Christmas had begun to feel they were family. His real family he had not seen or spoken to for over three years. He had gotten permission from Jerry to write them from his post office box, and he had done so, saying only that he was okay and had a job and that they shouldn't worry about him. It was his sister Delsie who had finally answered, four months later, her letter opening with, "Why did you run away?" and closing with, "I am praying for you." He wrote back after a few months more, and they began their half-hearted correspondence, she far more faithful to it in the end than he, during all the years of which, by unspoken mutual agreement, they never once alluded to their parents even indirectly.

Three weeks after his eighteenth birthday, he came home from shopping for one of Jerry's parties to find an uncharacteristically empty townhouse. In the foyer were stacked three large new suitcases and two new garment-bags of soft scarlet Italian glove-leather. When he opened them, he found them packed with the clothing and jewelry Jerry and Maxx had given him. On top of the top bag was a thick envelope. Inside it was a bundle of American Express traveler's cheques, a one-way bus ticket to Salt Lake City, and a note in Maxx's hand: "Kansas calls, Dorothy." There was no note from Jerry.

He did not go back to Salt Lake City. He left all the bags, clothing, and jewelry where they were and, pocketing the cheques and one of Maxx's straight razors, walked out of the townhouse without looking back. At the bus station he bought a ticket for New York, where Jerry and Maxx had taken him many times nightclubbing and theater-hopping. When he got to New York, he went straight to Washington Square Park in the Village. There he began his career in the Big Apple by scoring some coke, getting robbed, chasing, catching, and cutting the kid who robbed him, running from the kid's buddies, and ducking into an exceptionally sleazy jazz club ("clubette," Maxx would have called it). Eventually he ended up sharing a loft with a bunch of musicians who had what they called a "classic retro" band named Rat Fink.

He walked north on Riverside to the old pier. The wind was cool; it was nice not to be so hot. Lights were shining from the Stateline Lumber building, a boating party, very swank, slim women with their bangs and

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jeweled headbands and cigarette holders, slim men in dark suits and stiff collars topped with round-brimmed straw hats. The pier was hung with Chinese lanterns; punts bobbed on the water. A bar had been set up. Corks popped; people chattered high and chuckled low. A very young woman in a green fringed dress weaved over to him, her cigarette making firefly tracks in the night air. "Hey, Charley," she said. She was very drunk.

"I'm not Charley, Honey," said Joe Cantrell. She had on a lot of makeup. A tall man with a vulturine face shadowed her abruptly; she rolled her eyes up at him and gave an exasperated sigh. "There you are, Charley. Be a pal and get me a drink, will you?"

"You've had enough, darling."

The young woman pulled away. "I should think a girl would know when she'd had enough."

"Come along." Blinking, she went with him, stumbling slightly on the champagne-slick wood of the pier. Not once did the vulturine man glance in Joe's direction. Joe stood watching them go. He thought of the parties at Jerry's. He had seen people like that there. He felt a peculiar rush of love for her, almost acid in its urgency. He wanted to follow them, knock him aside, take her arm, sit her down, put his arm around her, hold her until her dead docility passed and her defiance returned. Someone coughed politely. He turned. An old lady in a turban and Japanese kimono was regarding him shrewdly through a lorgnette. She said, "Unless I miss my guess, you shouldn't be here."

"It was the water," Joe said. She was beautiful. Light flowered from the red silk space between her sagging breasts and vined through every pore of her. "I was hot."

"Of course you were." She nodded, her turban bobbing. "But you're going in the wrong direction. You're going back. You need to go forward."

"Forward?" Joe said.

"Toward the light, young man. Always toward the light." She gestured with her lorgnette, north and east over Riverside. He saw that the glow from the sky now seemed slightly stronger there, in the direction of Mary Street and Fifth Avenue. "That's where I came from," he said.

"Of course it is."

She melted back into the crowd of revelers. Three cops staggered by, red-nosed and merry, in dark blue dress uniforms with big brass buttons.

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Nobody seemed alarmed. The boats on the water moved silently, like sharks.

He walked away from the river back up the pier. Riverside was busy: lots of cars with small windows and running boards, theatergoers in furs; the Odeon; the Vanity. NOW APPEARING IN LIMITED ENGAGEMENT MISS FANNY BRICE. On the corner of Riverside and Arcady, the Riverside Hotel was awash in limousines. He passed a newsboy hawking a stack of thick, oversized papers. He glanced at a headline: PARIS FETES LINDBERGH. He turned up Arcady heading east.

There was snow on the street. Dark men in shabby coats, mufflers, and hats huddled in doorways for warmth. One of them, bareheaded, about twenty-five, stared at Joe as he passed; otherwise, he was ignored. At Arcady and Eighth, a WPA gang was hoisting a statue onto a pedestal in front of the Crews-Butler Building. A little farther on, two black women in starched maids' uniforms came out of an apartment building by a side entrance and nearly ran him over. He heard one say, "That Martian nonsense nearly scared me half to death." At Seventh Avenue, he passed a construction site where women in work uniforms walked to and fro, bandannas around their heads. A sour-faced burly man stood with a pad and pencil giving gruff orders. Younger men in uniforms passed up and down the street, grinning at the women's whistles and catcalls. WE CAN DO IT! declared Rosie from her poster. BUY WAR BONDS! said Uncle Sam from his.

At Sixth, there was only fire. He could not feel it, but he could see it, and what was worse, he could hear it roaring, like a beast of endless appetite. The whole block was burning. Fire engines, truncated, absurdly small, sprayed water ineffectually from heavy fabric hoses. People screamed, ran, fell, burned. A cat jumped nearly into his face. He reached out by reflex, and caught it. It dug claws into him and clung shivering. People got up from where they were burning and wandered away, naked and glowing, while their remains thrashed and crisped. There was a pork rind smell in the air.

Carrying the cat, Joe kept walking. Sixth was behind him. The sky cleared of smoke and flame until only the pale mother-of-pearl glow remained. Big-mustached immigrant men and their plump, over-rouged wives strolled along behind baby carriages. I LIKE IKE, said lapel buttons.

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The cat purred and chewed his bearded chin; he held his face to its belly and its warm heart thudded against his jaw. The buildings grew shabbier, the passersby darker of complexion. At a storefront chapel, an African man in a suit cut the crowd with a voice like a saw. Farther on, a tight knot of mourners had gathered in front of a TV store to watch the solemn cortege move up Pennsylvania Avenue. Street vendors with long hair sold love beads and bagged herbs to young people like themselves. He reached Fifth and turned left, where the pool parlors jumped and hummed like new.

Different whores were there, in silly clothes, all of them women. The cat wriggled free of his arms and padded amongst them without fear, leaking a faint light. There was no sign of Delores or Bobby or Cowboy or Gino Mongo. A pair of scared-looking, neatly dressed men handed out tracts to the whores, who tore them up without reading them, making crude remarks. "You tell 'em, girls!" called out Joe. He walked up to one of the men. "Hey!" he yelled at the man. "Hey! I'm talking to you!" The man paid no attention, bent low to his fellow, who with pursed lips and sidelong glances at the prostitutes hurried him along down the street.

Joe considered following them, but the sky was darker in the direction they were heading, and the Mary Street Bar and Grill was before him. Lights were on inside, and music, old stuff, loud but not strident. The paint on the sign was fresh; so were the bars on the windows. He glanced up at his apartment window; red-and-white-checked curtains fluttered at it, forming a backdrop to a window-box of red and white geraniums. He remembered Alexandra Marie once telling him that the first owner had lived above the place with his mother. *Working girls around the corner and Mama in the attic,* thought Joe. He wondered why he felt so sad.

As he stood bemused, a group of sailors reeled out of the bar and headed straight toward him. There was no time to move out of their way. He cried out, but they moved through him, and in that instant he felt their bodies around his: their sweat, their tight muscles, the beat of their hot blood, the heavy race of the alcohol through their veins, the clench of their thighs. They moved through and beyond him. He stood gasping; it was like being born again. He blinked down at the cat, who was sitting on her haunches blinking up at him with wide owl eyes.

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"Far out," he said.

He walked into the bar.

ALEXANDRA MARIE SCHENK bumped open the kitchen door with her butt, hoisting her heavy tray. "Hot stuff coming through!" she hollered, as Joe had taught her, and several sailors laughed, as somebody nearly always did. She was still feeling the buzz from the cocaine she and Eubie the bouncer had shared. *Good buddy*, she thought. Joe was a good buddy, too, although it was too bad that he was a fag. She wondered why he hadn't come by tonight. It seemed to her that he had looked a little peaked recently.

She moved around the room, flirting with a few customers, fending off others, grinning and wise-assing, keeping the mood easy and fun. Everybody was tense tonight because of the shootings on Delmar. It wasn't helping that Sam the Bartender was looking grimmer than usual in his Army camouflage muscle shirt and mirrored aviator sunglasses, speaking only in monosyllables, refusing to banter. His tattoos were the friendliest thing about him. They wiggled and winked with every move of his massive shoulders and arms. Alexandra Marie had a tattoo also: an ankh 'way down on her left ankle. She had hoped it would be a sort of bond between Sam and her.

But she and Sam were not good buddies. Sam was not good buddies with anybody. He liked his girlfriends much younger than the law allowed. Rumor had it that he got them mostly used up from Maurice Callander's and when he was done with them they disappeared. Sometimes Alexandra Marie fantasized about it, the way somebody who loathes and despises snakes will stand in the snake house at the zoo and stare.

The door opened and Maurice Callander came in, flanked by a pair of matched gumbies, one black, one white. Conversation did not still, the way conversations do in Westerns when the Bad Guy enters the saloon, but anuses in the know clenched all over the room. Maurice was skinny, child-faced, and dead-eyed; he looked sick. Eubie the Bouncer clenched his jaw and nodded professionally at the gumbies, who did not return his nod, which made his nostrils dilate. Alexandra Marie approached Maurice,

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smiling. "Good evening, Mister Callander," she said. "Would you like me to clear a booth for you?"

"No, thank you," replied Maurice in his bookie's voice. "I will need to speak to Samuel, however." The words had scarcely left his mouth when Sam the Bartender appeared, as though the words had become Sam, as though he had coalesced out of them. Sam looked at Eubie and jerked his thumb barward. Eubie did a fade. "Mister Callander," Sam said, nodding. The two men, followed by the gumbies, strolled like old friends around the bar and disappeared through the swinging door in the back.

Immediately some local patrons floated from their stools, paid their tabs, and drifted toward the door. Most returned to their drinks as though nothing had happened (*Well, nothing has,* reasoned Alexandra Marie). The atmosphere of the bar was much subdued for the next hour or so, despite Alexandra Marie's attempts to work the room, smoothing things over and cheering things up. Then Sam returned from the back. He went to work as though he had just stepped out for five minutes to take a piss. Alexandra Marie knew better than to question his carefully blank face.

A little past one, the after-dance cruising crowd started filling the place again. Whores, both male and female, mixed with the patrons, looking if anything better-dressed. Alexandra Marie wondered again where Joe Cantrell was. He had usually dropped down by this time to check out the action. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Ricky and Mickey come in. They were drag queens, semi-regulars from the Ritz Cabaret on Belmont. The Ritz Cabaret was owned by Maurice Callander, like everything else in this neighborhood. They were well known to Eubie the bouncer, who would have protected them from the other patrons if they had needed protection, but they never did, partly because they were experts with the switchblade and everyone knew it, and partly because Ricky was the grandson of a well-known local mob figure, not Maurice Callander. Music and cigarette smoke swirled around them.

Normally they both looked very, very cool, very vigilant, very competent. But tonight when finally Alexandra Marie got a second and bustled up to them to say hi (Ricky was an excellent tipper), she took one look, then pulled them each by a sleeve around the side of the room to the hall where the public telephone was. "What in God's name is wrong with you two?" she demanded.

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"Nothing," said Ricky, shakily. His voice was theatrical and womanish. He was the elegant one, small and light-boned, with soft cascades of undyed silver hair and creamy translucent skin. Tonight he was dressed in a pale blue silk crêpe de chine evening sheath which Alexandra Marie would have killed to fit into, and his face bore a stunned expression that made him look ten years younger. Mickey was the trashy one, Irish-red hair buzz-cut, cute freckles, multiple nose-rings, studded low-cut scarlet leather, tiny boobs, tattoos, and fishnet stockings. Oddly, he had always seemed to Alexandra Marie to be the more successfully female of the two. Mickey had once belonged to an all-pseudogirl group called the Whipettes. He was rumored to have a humongous penis. Tonight he looked thoughtful, which was so unusual for him that Eubie the Bouncer, on his way to something else, did a double-take. "What's the story?" he rumbled.

"It's Joe," said Ricky.

"He's dead," said Mickey.

"Oh my God," said Alexandra Marie. She put a scarred hand to her mouth, and sorrow burst in her heart like a water balloon.

"Ginny caught some kid with what looked like Joe's bag," growled Mickey. "Ginny made the kid tell him where he found it. The kid said he got it off some stiff." He shrugged.

"But why?" said Alexandra Marie. The silliness of the question struck her instantaneously.

"Where'd they find him?" asked Eubie. He did not bother to ask "How did it happen?" If there had been something left near the body for the child to steal, then it had not been murder, which left only two other avenues for a junkie: accidental O.D. or suicide.

"Perp Miz," breathed Ricky. "Under the Virgin."

"Did anyone call the police?" asked Alexandra. The three men looked at her with identical expressions, like a sister act. She said helplessly, "He might still be alive. He might be in a coma."

"He was *dead*, Alexandra Marie," said Mickey harshly.

She turned to Eubie. "Call them, for Christ's sake!" The big man rolled his eyes to heaven and reached for the telephone, holding out his pale palm for a quarter. She dug in her apron and slapped one down against his fingers, so angry she could not see. It did not seem right to let Joe just lie there in the dark.

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A shout from the bar summoned her back into the evening's fray. There was no question of disobedience; there was nothing she could do for Joe, not now, not ever. As she hurried off, she heard Eubie suggesting politely to the queens that they not spread the Good News too vociferously in this particular establishment on this particular evening. A leisurely time later, an ambulance wailed past, heading south and east. When she turned around again at the next lull, the queens were gone and Eubie was busy hanging some drunks out to dry. It was nearly three in the morning, closing time, before she was able to think of Joe again.

Accompanied by Eubie, she climbed the stairs to Joe's apartment, wondering what they would find there. They found the door unlocked. Inside, Divine stared down at them from the wall with a challenging expression on his alien face. All of Joe's things were there. Eubie did a quick search of the rooms for abandoned pharmaceuticals, which, he pointed out logically, an ascended Joe Cantrell could not possibly need. He was disappointed to find only a little pot, which he pocketed, offering to divide it with Alexandra Marie, who declined. In Joe's bedroom, she poked through an opened dresser drawer and found a book. She pulled it out. It was small and slim and bound in leather. In the front of it, on the blank page before the title page, someone had written in a childish scrawl JOSEPH SMITH CANTRELL. Many of the pages were marked, passages underlined, YES! written in the margins by some of them in the same young hand. She turned back to the title page. *The Pearl of Great Price*, it said. She put the book back in the drawer.

In the end she took only a little china figurine, a pretend Irish house with a green shamrock on the side which she had found in a secondhand shop and given Joe one Christmas as a gag, for good luck. Eubie kept taking things out of closets and putting them in stacks. "I'm going," she said to him. He grunted and kept rummaging. She left the apartment and walked downstairs. Outside, it was the gray place between night and morning.

The first two things Joe noticed when he entered the Mary Street Bar were that it seemed larger inside than he remembered it, and that the glow he had been tracking was here as well, hovering somewhere near the ceiling. Cigarette smoke billowed through it in innocent white clouds.

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The jukebox was jumping and the place was packed. Uniformed servicemen rubbed shoulders with bikers, drag queens with stevedores, immaculate clean-shaven men in dark glasses with map-faced grizzled winos, and nobody was fighting; there was laughter and good-natured swearing, backslaps, table-pounding, but nothing ugly; a holiday mood. *When was Mary's ever like this*? he thought. He saw nobody he knew. The cat rubbed against his leg and he picked it up again.

There were two new bartenders on duty, white guys, working like dogs. The glow from the ceiling lit up the tiers of liquor bottles, striking sparks from their dim interiors. He moved slowly toward the counter. A Marine lumbered through him, shouting beerily; then a pale junkie clinging with a silly smile on her face to her silent beau-of-the-moment; then a tray-hoisting waitress breathing tobacco and perfume. For Joe each contact was a lyrical shock of flesh and blood and bursting sensual vitality, in and through and gone in a flash. *Even the sick ones are so damn alive*, he thought. He looked for the wall clock he was used to; it was not in its accustomed location over the bar and he could not find another. It had to be late. Where was Alexandra Marie?

He turned his back to the bar just as the street door opened. Two men came in. One was Maurice Callander, looking robust and tanned. His companion was in his late twenties, ruggedly built, black-haired and black-mustached, with a more than slightly worn street beauty, a rather weak chin, and quick, observant eyes. He was wearing a tight T-shirt, fatigue trousers, and dog-tags. His nipples showed through his T-shirt. Joe found himself assessing the youth from a professional standpoint. He was obviously trade; he had good chest, good arms with no obvious track marks, good thighs; probably a good basket though with the fatigues it was a little tough to be sure; and he would not be young much longer.

The cat stirred in Joe's grip, kneaded his right wrist with its right paw. With a start he realized where and when he was. It was the night the Mary Street Bar and Grill had reopened under new management, the management of local entrepreneur Maurice Callander. And it was the night he, Joe Cantrell, had come to what would prove to be his final place of residence. No wonder everybody was happy: drinks had been on the house that night. The arrival of Alexandra Marie was a year or so in the future; Eubie would not sign on for three, Sam the Bartender for four or five. Remembering, Joe

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stared afresh at his younger self, standing polite and attentive at Callander's side. They would go upstairs soon, to what would be Joe's apartment for the final ten years of his life. Afterward, Callander would say he had "class" and "would make a mint in skinflicks" and, after introducing him around at various parties, set him up in business. Joe felt himself gripped with a fierce pride. *Go for it, kiddo,* he thought. *Show 'em what a talented Utah boy can do!* Because he needed to kiss somebody, he kissed the cat on the top of its furry head.

And felt a tap on his right shoulder.

He turned. It was Maxx. He was dressed in a brilliant gold-lamé sheath and shoulder-length Marilyn Monroe blonde wig. His lipstick and nail polish were violent purple. He was not wearing any razors. He waved a hand in the smoky air. "So what do you think, Honey?" he yelled over the music. "Isn't it a riot? I always did love a party."

"Is that really you, Maxx?" asked Joe. "You look like a Supreme on acid."

"Define 'really' in this context, Chicken," drawled Maxx from beneath heavy purpled lids. "And that's *three* x's now, puh-*leeze*." A whore staggered through him and away. Maxxx watched her go and shook his head. "Honestly, these *styles!* You have to love the Eighties. Who's your friend?" He indicated the cat.

"He was in a fire," said Joe. The cat matched Maxxx's lidded stare with one of its own. "Maxxx, are you — if you can see me, I mean touch me, then you must be — "

"*Dead*?" Maxxx put his palms to his cheeks and made a violet moue of mock horror. "Sugar, it's all right. You can say the word; it won't kill you. Of course I'm dead. We're all dead. That's why we came. To see you off."

"'We?'" said Joe.

"The Gang. Come on over and say hidy." Maxxx took him by the left arm and propelled him through shifting waves of patrons to a clear space at one end of the room, where a couple of round tables had been set up next to each other. At one table sat the turbaned old woman with the lorgnette who had steered him toward the light. She had a large piece of chocolate-frosted chocolate layer cake in front of her, a third consumed, and she was gazing upon the others indulgently. Next to her slouched Beau, Joepye's

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bi boyfriend, who had introduced Joe to coke and free weights. He was looking shy but happy; *perhaps,* thought Joe, *he was shy about being happy.* Next to him, flirting madly in drunken monologue, sat the girl in the green fringed dress. She was evidently free of her vulturine companion and enjoying it, throwing back her head with an open-throated laugh as she gestured wildly with her cigarette-holder. Next to her, contemplatively slugging Jim Beam out of a bottle, was Dolph Klegg, the drummer from Rat Fink. Dolph had liked water sports and had been the one who'd pressured the others to let Joe share their Village loft with them. He was tapping his fingers on the tabletop to the music from the jukebox. Joe wondered how he'd died. Next to him was an empty chair.

At the second table sat the bare-headed man from the winter Depression street, nursing a beer and talking quietly with a thin-boned, big-nosed, kind-faced woman who looked as out of place in this raucous dream of a bar as anyone could have looked. She appeared to be drinking seltzer, and she listened to the quiet man with evident pleasure. She was, Joe realized with a start, his second grade teacher, Miss Arquette, whom he had not thought of in over twenty years. Next to her was Tarantula, the gorilla-like bouncer from Thrash, the place in Key West Joe had hung out a lot. 'Rant, Joe recalled, had been into breath suppression scenes, and Joe knew very well how he'd died: a shot to the head during a midnight drug run off Islamorada. He was playing placid poker with a big man whose face was turned into his cards so that Joe could not make out his features. Next to him was another empty chair. "Hey, everybody!" Maxxx cried. "See who *I* found wandering around like a lost soul!"

They looked up at his hail, their cheeks flushed with talk and booze, looked up and called and waved in surprise and glad pleasure. The turbaned lady said, "Well, at last, at last." Beau said, "Hey, José," their little joke. The sequined girl said, "Welcome to the party, darling!" Dolph said, "Yo, Joey; how's it hangin', bro'?" The street guy raised his beer bottle in toast. Miss Arquette said, "Joseph, you are a *picture.*" Tarantula rumbled something inaudible, flashing a gold-toothed grin. And the man on the end turned around and looked up, and it was Brother Oral.

Joe stood where he was. The cat squirmed and dropped out of his arms. Maxxx put an arm around his waist, kissed him on the left cheek, and patted his ass. "Come on, Joe. It's your party."

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"Come on, Joe!" "Hey, buddy, get over here!" "Joseph?" But he could not move. Oral was exactly the way Joe remembered him: big-shouldered, round-faced, dove-eyed, in a gray polyester suit with a white shirt and a burgundy tie. He met Joe's gaze steadily, with a kind, wise affection that Joe knew only too well.

Joe took a step backward. Maxxx let go of him. "Okay," Joe said. "I get it now. I get it."

"Hush," said the old woman with the lorgnette to the others. "Let him speak." They fell silent, watching him, merry no longer. "Okay, Maxxx," Joe said to his friend. "I think I get what's going on now. This is it. The end of the line. The buck stops here. This is where fags and other sinners go when they die, or the prelude to it. Our last chance to howl, right? And then what? Limbo for suicides? Weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing for working boys? Or just a repentant reincarnation as a missionary sister in West Hollywood?'

"No, Honey."

The jukebox sounded as loud as ever, but the drag queen's gravity was louder. Joe gritted his teeth and spun around, looking for somebody to take it out on. He took in the Mary Street Bar: patrons, whores, staff, junkies, cigarette and reefer smoke, the odd glow from the rafters. "If this isn't," he said desperately, and stopped. He turned back to the waiting, watchful group. "If this isn't the gate to Hell. And if you aren't — " He stopped again. The cat had jumped up on the table next to Brother Oral and was observing him mildly. Its eyes were green; he had not noticed that before. He realized that he was crying, and he was not sure why. It was not shame; not shame, at least, for what he was or had become. It was something else he did not have a name for. "If *this* is *heaven*," he managed through chattering teeth, "then *what the fuck is that goddamn fucking child molester doing here*?"

"Oh, honey," said Maxxx. He held out a purple-nailed hand, palm up. There was a spot of blood in the center of the palm, and as Joe watched, it welled up larger and larger until it spilled and dropped down over his fingers and onto the floor of the bar. Joe looked past him to the others. They were holding their palms up, too: the turbaned lady, Beau, the flapper, Dolph the drummer, the street guy, the teacher, even Oral. And in the center of each palm, male or female or slender or broad or gay or

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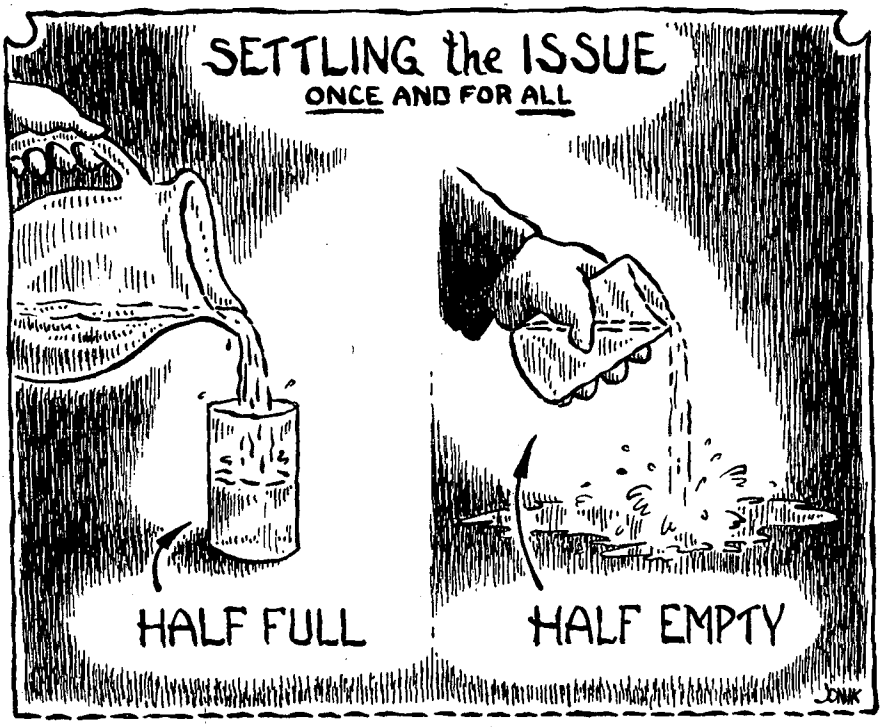
straight or bi or white or brown or black, the stigmata welled and flowed. He raised his own hands. They felt normal, and they looked fine from the back: big knuckles, strong veins ("Nothing like good old junkie venation!" somebody had said to him once), black hairs like wires, thick wrists. He had never been good at fisting; his hands were too big. He turned them over. Two bright eyes of blood winked back at him, dripping.

"Welcome to the family, Joe," said Maxxx.

And heaven, like a pearl, descended.



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And now, a bit of levity.

For years, science fiction and fantasy writers — and readers — have argued about what the difference is between science fiction and fantasy. Damon Knight has said that science fiction is whatever he points to. Arthur C. Clarke once wrote that sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic. Great minds have pondered the topic for most of this century.

Finally, in the century's waning years, we have a definitive proof, provided by Jerry Oltion. Jerry made his name as a hard science fiction writer, but he commits the occasional fantasy to paper. Who better, then, to come up with the solution once and for all?

The Difference Between Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Mathematical Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

WRITERS, EDITORS, FANS, and critics of science fiction and fantasy have long argued over a precise definition of the two respective genres, mistakenly assuming that such definitions will permit them to establish a strict delineation between the two and thus determine the relative superiority of one genre over the other. This effort is doomed at the outset due to the immense difficulty in agreeing on the rigorous set of criteria necessary for the establishment of literary definitions. Mathematics, however, bypasses that hurdle by providing terms whose value is already known and whose relative magnitude can be easily compared. This paper explores the mathematical approach to determining the precise difference between the two genres.

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METHODS

The greatest obstacle to the mathematical approach was in converting the terms "science fiction" and "fantasy" into numerical values upon which the ensuing analysis could be made. Fortunately, data transmission techniques over the last few decades have provided a convenient method of numerical encoding, namely the simple substitution of digits for letters. The American Standard Code for Information Interchange (ASCII) was briefly considered for this project, but the encoding begins at an arbitrarily high number (65), and makes an unnecessary distinction between upper and lower case letters. The fundamental underlying principle of ASCII encoding, however, remains valid: i.e. a sequential substitution from A to Z, with A receiving the lowest value and Z receiving the highest. The only possible non-arbitrary choice for a starting point is to begin encoding with the cardinal number 1, and proceed sequentially through the standard English alphabet to a value of 26 for the letter Z (table 1). From there it is a simple matter to sum the values of the digits representing the words "science fiction" and "fantasy" and to compute their difference (table 2).

RESULTS

After encoding and summation, "science fiction" was found to have a value of 134 and "fantasy" was found to have a value of 86. Subtraction produces the result: 48. This may be taken as the definitive, rigorously mathematical difference between the two genres.

INTERPRETATION

This value at first seems reasonable. However, as Adams[1] has hypothesized in his ground-breaking work, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (a work that straddles both genres under question, and therefore must be accepted unquestioningly by both camps), the answer to the ultimate question about Life, the Universe, and Everything should be 42. This means that the calculated result is 6 off from the theoretically obtained value, a deviation of over 14%.

Could there be an error in the calculation? Since the author of this paper is primarily a writer of science fiction, not fantasy, the chance of that happening is so insignificant as to be laughable, but the two terms were re-encoded and the addition and subtraction were performed again

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on the back of a new envelope, and the answer remains 48. The correct spelling of "science fiction" and "fantasy" has also been checked.

Could Adams's value be in error? That is equally laughable. As anyone in the publishing business knows, no one who sells more than a million copies of each of his books *and* who spends over five months on the *New York Times* bestseller list[2] can be wrong.

Perhaps the question, "What is the difference between science fiction and fantasy?" is not the ultimate question. This seems unlikely, however, given the immense attention this conundrum has garnered from nearly every professional in the field. At conventions and on the computer networks, more time is spent arguing this question than any other, including just what sort of story will win the Nebula and Hugo Awards.[3]

TABLE 1

LETTER:	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
NUMBER:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
LETTER:	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
NUMBER:	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

TABLE 2

S	=	19	F	=	6
C	=	3	A	=	1
I	=	9	N	=	14
E	=	5	T	=	20
N	=	14	A	=	1
C	=	3	S	=	19
E	=	5	Y	=	25
					—
F	=	6	SUM =		86
I	=	9			
C	=	3			
T	=	20			134
I	=	9			− 86
O	=	15			—
N	=	14	DIFFERENCE = 48		
		—			
SUM = 134					

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Nor could the discrepancy be explained as the result of agents taking their customary 15% commission, as that would skew the data in the other direction, producing a result of 35.7. Moreover, both science fiction and fantasy authors use agents, and thus their effects cancel out.

Hence the discrepancy between the calculated and theoretical results must lie within the science fiction and fantasy genres themselves.

DISCUSSION

As science fiction is the larger term (the minuend) and fantasy the smaller (the subtrahend), and as the calculated value for their difference is larger than the theoretical value, it is obvious that either science fiction is somehow too large, or that fantasy is too small to deliver the proper result. This realization leads to the next question: is this a qualitative or a quantitative value?

Fortunately this can be answered with a simple reductio ad absurdum. If the difference were quantitative, then there would have to be either too much science fiction or too little fantasy; however, a review of market listings[4] for the major magazines and book publishers indicates that editors are reporting a relative lack of science fiction, which would hardly be the case if there were too much of it. Also, no fantasy magazines or book publishers report a similar lack of material, which should be the case if there were too little fantasy.

In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests just the opposite. Respected critics have publicly stated that fantasy — particularly the most prevalent forms of it known as the "trilogy" or "endless series" — is stealing the rack space from real (i.e. science fiction) books. This could not be the case if there were too little of it.

Therefore, the difference between the two genres must be qualitative.

CONCLUSIONS

We began by demonstrating that the difference between science fiction and fantasy could be solved mathematically. Our result (48) unexpectedly led us to another conclusion: that the difference must be qualitative.

Despite the near perfection of many works in the science fiction genre,[5] no one can reasonably argue that the quality of science fiction is

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too high. Sturgeon's Law[6] also precludes that notion. Therefore, we have reached the inescapable conclusion that fantasy is qualitatively deficient. The degree of deficiency has been shown to be 6, or 14.3%.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

Since the mathematical method has proved so successful in answering the science fiction/fantasy question, its use is indicated in any similar argument. For instance, a comparison of apples (69) and oranges (79) reveals that they are actually more similar than different, their difference (10) being only 13.5% of their mean value (74).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Review of an early draft of this paper by L. Goodloe is gratefully acknowledged.

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*Many critics dispute the word "crap," insisting that Sturgeon said "crud" instead.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

GOING TO MARS

IS THERE LIFE on Mars? My last column explored the state of the (admittedly skimpy) data and prospects (quite grand). To close with the issue means closing with Mars, understanding its past and measuring its present.

Fifty-two percent farther from Earth, and therefore enjoying only 43% as much sunlight, Mars has waged a long battle against the cold. But there have been summer vacations, too.

Deducing planetary pasts is subtle work. The sharp, well-defined craters which in the 1970s flyby missions first told us of an era of bombardment have since yielded more information, after detailed study. Young craters show muddy ejecta — outflows from when the impact melted the surrounding icy permafrost. This tapping of momentarily heated water from underground apparently happened throughout most Martian history.

Near the equator, only craters bigger than four kilometers across show mud flows. Closer to the poles, craters one kilometer in diameter have relic mud flow formations nearby. Bigger impacts reach further into the dusty ground. This suggests that the dry crust is at least 800 meters thick at the equator but only a few hundred meters near the poles.

Why? Because the warmer Martian "tropics" have dried out. Careful study of Viking and Mariner mission photos reveals, all across the planet's surface, ancient crater walls with incised outlet channels. They look awfully like river trenches which perhaps drained the trapped waters of lakes in those ancient craters.

Elsewhere, ridges of sand and

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gravel seem to show sediments which piled up at the margins of melting glaciers — signs of a chilly past, but a wet one.

Such evidence has led scientists to estimate global Martian oceans up to half a kilometer deep. Extensive northern plains suggest sediments from a vast ocean, either of clear water or a muddy slurry.

Parallel evidence comes from the meteorites found in Antarctica over the last decade, which seem to be from Mars. Some have minerals of the sort chemically altered by cool, salty water, while others seem affected by warmer hydrothermal solutions. These suggest an ancient warm, wet climate and maybe hot springs.

Mars still has lots of water. Soviet probes approaching Mars detected oxygen and hydrogen atoms streaming away from Mars, presumably from atmospheric water broken down by ultraviolet light. Using their measurements, one can work backwards in time, supposing that the outflow slowed as water retreated from the outer skin of the planet. This leads to an estimated water inventory several billion years ago ample enough to fill oceans, now presumably mostly lost. Even the Viking soil samples from near the equator showed water of at least one percent by weight.

As Mars aged, its youthful seas gradually dried into cold, dry, pock-marked plains. Still, the cratering rate in different parts of the surface suggests that there were later, scattered eras of warmth and melted tundra apparently occurred. How?

Mars' poles, like Earth's, are canted at about 24 degrees with respect to its orbital plane. Unlike Earth, it apparently tilts widely over time, to as much as sixty degrees, because of perturbations from Jupiter. This rearranges the warming patterns.

With enough polar heating, Mars could have melted the frozen water and carbon dioxide there. This would recreate a thicker atmosphere, rich in carbon dioxide. That would in turn have a greenhouse effect, melting the permafrost everywhere and driving even more warming.

Returning eventually to more moderate tilt angles would halt this. Rocks would also lock up carbon dioxide, weakening the greenhouse. Dry-ice snows would fall, thinning the atmosphere, plunging the entire planet back into its ice age. Detailed studies show that Mars could not escape fully from its chilly fate.

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* * *

But Mars is warmer deeper down, just like Earth.

Ground-penetrating radar on the surface could locate pools of water heated by magma from below if they were within a kilometer of the surface. In the volcanic regions, there must remain vents and cracks where gases escape the greater pressures below, just as on Earth.

Geothermal vents are enticing. As I discussed last time, we now know that an entirely different kingdom of life, the Archaea, live near vents on our oceans' floors. These bacteria are billions of years old and live not on oxygen and sunlight, but on hydrogen and sulfur.

Even more interesting, bacteria near our vents may show attraction for the light of these vents. The openings glow, and life that could locate such rich cornucopias would presumably have survival advantage. Indeed, shrimp adapted to our vents have bright stripes partway down their back which are light sensitive. These stripes are not eyes, but may lead the shrimp to their bacterial food source. This may be an example of how eyes began their evolution.

Evolutionary theorists now suspect that vent life billions of years ago may have played a vital role in a portentous event: evolution of photosynthesis. Suppose vent life near the shore upwellings migrated to shallow waters, drawn by light. If they survived, their light-finding machinery could then evolve to do more with the sunlight — harness it to combine molecules into fuel for the body.

This is universally our plants' strategy now, but it need not have come from the surface alone. The shrimp respond best to red light, the strongest color near the vents, whereas plants have evolved to prefer yellow-green, where the sun's spectrum is most powerful. Evolution has been at its steady labors.

Such scenarios are speculative, though respectable. They point to a possible crucial role of vent life. On Mars, perhaps something similar played out, too.

As Mars cooled and dried out, any life in the shallows of its muddy seas would retreat as well — inevitably, back into the warm, wet silts where a tenuous existence was still possible.

If life had used the early Martian air, it had to learn to do without. Only water and occasional gases could feed it. A chemistry based on hydrogen and sulfur and perhaps other schemes could survive without oxygen, though still using the

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thinner and thinner carbon dioxide of the scant atmosphere.

It could burrow deeply into Mars, just as on Earth bacteria living without oxygen have dug miles deep into our soil and rock. In three billion years our vent life has not developed far, sticking to the trusty bacterial strategies.

But then, it has been competing with oxygen-emitting forms whose very exhalations are a deadly poison. We have no idea what directions such life might follow in the quite different Martian conditions.

This is an agenda for going to Mars for the purely grand scientific reason of understanding life — whether it evolved there, as the recent meteorite findings suggest, and whether it has held on through a long, wearying battle against the cold dryness.

We already have three probes, launched in late 1996, on their way to study the planet further. The first landing will occur July 4, 1997, twenty-one years since Viking arrived. The probes will circle and land upon Mars, culminating in a mission around 2005 to return a sample to Earth for laboratory study.

This is an exciting agenda, but my heart wants more.

If life might still hang on in warm vents, there are good reasons to prefer sending people. No one I have discussed this with believes we could send robots capable of climbing down into warm, wet vents to find life. After all, the wet regions could be hundreds of meters down.

The task is just too tricky for machines, which are best at rolling over reasonably flat surfaces and poking at reasonably well known objects. Finding life will demand *us*.

So how about going in person?

Since the late 1980s a small group of engineers, the Mars Underground, has invented a low-cost way to go there cheaply using current technology. Robert Zubrin's *The Case for Mars* engagingly details these ideas, which I shall summarize. The book is well worth the time of any space buff.

The Underground skips over the unmanned missions era we currently are living through, envisioning the first manned attempt. Just as with the Apollo program's "No Buck Rogers, no bucks" motto, *people* are the key to public enthusiasm.

The spirit of the Underground's "Mars Direct" plan is to shuck away all excess. No diversionary moon base. No big space station to as-

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semble a dreadnought fleet. No fleet, just missions launched from Earth, then propelled outward by the upper stage of the same booster rocket that launched them. They then land on Mars, after a long gliding journey, as the Apollo shots did.

But the true trick is getting to Mars without squandering our entire Gross National Product. When President Bush called in 1989 for a manned mission to Mars on the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Apollo landing, he got the estimated bill from NASA: 450 billion dollars.

The sticker shock killed Bush's initiatives in Congress. The price was high because everyone in NASA and their parasite companies tacked every conceivable extra onto the mission.

So the key to Mars Direct is *living off the land*. No giant canisters of rocket fuel get lugged to Mars, only to be burned bringing the crew back to Earth. No fluids like water hauled along for an eighteen-month mission. Instead, get the basic chemicals from the Martian atmosphere.

The Mars Direct plan begins by sending an *unmanned* lander to Mars, which will eventually serve as the return launcher. It carries a small nuclear reactor for power, an automated chemical processor, some scientific rovers, and the return mission launcher, *unfueled*.

Then it starts to work. Using the nuclear reactor power, plus perhaps some solar panels, it starts its compressors. They suck in the thin Martian carbon dioxide (CO_2) and combine it with a store of hydrogen it has hauled from Earth. This makes methane (CH_4) and water. The chemical plant is compact, laboring for half a year to separate the methane into the rocket fuel tanks. It also cleans some of the water for later human use.

The rest of the water gets broken into oxygen and hydrogen, keeping the oxygen for later combination with the methane in the rocket combustion chambers of the return vehicle. The hydrogen goes back to make more methane from the Martian carbon dioxide.

All this is simple, well-known chemistry, a staple process for over a century. Taking to Mars only hydrogen as a feed stock for the process, the ship has made eighteen times as much rocket fuel as the mass of hydrogen it brought. Taking all that fuel to Mars would have cost billions, plus assembly of the mission in orbit. By going slim and smart, we save all that.

Had the early European explorers had to carry all their food, water

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and fodder to the New World, few could have gone. Going to Mars demands using the easiest resource there — its air.

Thirteen months after the first launch, a refueled return rocket sits on the Martian plain, awaiting the humans. They launch from Earth only when the return vehicle is ready, and the rovers have found a good landing site for the manned expedition.

They leave on a big Saturn-style booster rocket. Mostly their payload is a habitation module that looks like a giant's drum, five meters high and eight meters across. With two decks and a crew of four, it has a closed-loop life support system, recycling the air and water. The entire mission takes about two and a half years so there is plenty of food, books and video tapes.

The upper stage flings them toward Mars. As it burns out, the upper stage pulls away on a tether cable about 300 meters long. A small rocket fires on the habitation drum, setting it to revolving with the upper stage as its counter-weight. At two revolutions a minute, the habitation drum has a centrifugal gravity of 0.38 Earth's, that of Mars.

In the next six months there will be plenty of time for exercising to get used to this gravity. For reading and fixing anything that breaks. For sending messages home and keeping up on the latest from the target site, where the rovers are learning more.

The astronauts will glide through the dark immensity, taking some data for digital transmission to the ever more distant Earth.

After 180 days following a long, curving trajectory close to the minimum-energy orbit, the habitation cuts the cable, and flies free into the top of the Martian atmosphere. Rather than firing its rocket right away, it uses an aeroshell — a cone-shaped buffer — to brake itself as it swings around the planet. Attaining an orbit, the crew looks over the landing site. If the weather is good — and Mars has ferocious dust storms at times — they target on the radio beacon set up for them and ride their rocket down to within a short distance of the fueled return vehicle.

Only after they are down do they then send a signal to their backup: a second return vehicle, launched a week or two after they were. Identical to the first vehicle, this too has a chemical plant for processing CO_2. If by incredible bad luck they land too far from their return vehicle, this backup can be ordered to land near them. If not

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needed for emergency rescue, it then lands a thousand kilometers away from the first site, to be ready for the second manned expedition a year or two later.

The four-person crew is basically two flexible mechanics and two field scientists. Between them they thoroughly explore within the thousand-kilometer range of the rover which the first, unmanned shot brought along. The rover burns methane and oxygen, siphoned off the fuel tanks of the return vehicle.

They will look for geological clues to Martian prehistory, to the slow agony when the planet lost its seas to the constant drying of sun and space. Certainly they will drill for water ice, perhaps a few meters below the Martian crust. Water is crucial to long-term use of Mars. At a minimum, water would free future expeditions from hauling hydrogen from Earth to convert the carbon dioxide.

They can experiment with growing plants inside inflatable plastic greenhouses, perhaps even raise and eat the first extraterrestrial crop. Such forward-looking research will take time, but they will have it: about a year and a half. Only then will a low-energy orbit back home be available. They leave behind at Mars Base 1 a working rover, chemical plants, stocks of methane/oxygen fuel, a greenhouse, plus their scientific gear. They carry to Earth many samples, arriving in six months.

A bit after their return, a second manned launch leaves. It lands beside that second return vehicle a thousand kilometers from Mars Base 1. Again they explore and learn from this Mars Base 2. They can even drive in their own rover back to Mars Base 1 to thriftily retrieve fuel, scientific information and gear.

All this is risky. Making exploration super-safe is not only hugely expensive, it is impossible. Further, it is anti-dramatic: the public audience will thrill all the more if lives truly are at stake.

The risks will be both obvious — a blowup at launch, as with the *Challenger* shuttle — and subtle, as with radiation dosage. The voyage between planets exposes the crew to the solar particle wind and to cosmic rays. They can shelter from solar storms, which are infrequent, but the rest of their exposure amounts to about a five percent increased probability to having a fatal cancer within their life span.

Further, Mars itself could do them in. Storms could collapse their habitat or blow over their return

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rocket. Dust could clog the pumps at the crucial blast off.

But Mars isn't that nasty, usually. Our 1970s Viking landers were designed to last ninety days, yet one held out for four years against cold, wind and dust, and the other lasted six.

Multiple backup systems are the key to safety. Remember that second return vehicle sitting a thousand kilometers away. If they have to, the crew could slog that distance in their rover and go home once the chemical plant there had made enough fuel. That might mean staying on Mars longer, but at least they would get home — and get more exploring done, too.

The more backups, the higher the cost. Bush's 450 billion dollar program showed that a NASA-run program could easily turn into an enormous government pork farm.

When I asked Robert Zubrin over lunch how much his Mars Direct plan would cost, he estimated 50 billion. But then he said, "Of course, the true cost is only about 5 billion."

A factor of ten in overhead! Some of that comes from the inevitable extra backups any NASA attempt would carry, but most of it would be pure paperwork pork. The most radical idea afoot in *The Case for Mars* is that we could get this adventure on the cheap by simply offering a prize of, say, 20 billion dollars to the first successfully returned manned expedition.

This is the mechanism European governments used for risky explorations centuries ago. The advantages are that the government puts out not a dime until the job is done, and only rewards success; investors lose if their schemes fail. Also, if astronauts die, it is on somebody else's head, not an embarrassment to a whole government. Plus, it saves money *and* engenders a sense of freedom and danger. The TV rights will be considerable...

All humanity will follow them through their adventures. Exploration will surely yield stunning sights and insights. Though Earth will be tens of minutes away for radio transmission, the sights and even sounds of Mars will fly back to us. Every important discovery will be on the evening news, with sharp pictures. Mars will cease to be Space and become a place.

The 1994 Mars Observer, a billion dollar package designed to study Mars from orbit, probably blew a fuel line as it prepared to fire its engines. Basically, all space propulsion still uses chemical rockets,

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often with liquid oxygen and hydrogen. These are notoriously hard to keep error-free after years in deep space. Further, we have reached the end of the tether with them; no significant improvements seem possible.

Columbus voyaged in ships built for coastal trips; the New World's beckoning urged development of true oceanic craft. Need drives development. Going to Mars with huge, old-fashioned chemical boosters is all right for a first attempt, perhaps, but does not invest in the future. Luckily, we already have a better way which builds on research already done.

In 1960 NASA and the Atomic Energy Commission started the Nuclear Energy for Rocket Vehicle Application program, a name seemingly designed to produce a useful acronym, NERVA. The basic idea was that a high power nuclear reactor carries a lot of energy in a small space. Cold hydrogen flowing past it could remove heat and expand, thrusting through a nozzle, yielding two to three times the thrust per pound of hydrogen reaction mass, compared with liquid oxygen and hydrogen rockets.

The idea worked. By 1969 a prototype nuclear engine ran for two hours, interrupted dozens of times to test control systems. The big improvement over chemical rocket performance comes from a simple fact — that the thrust of a rocket varies inversely with the square root of the propellant molecular weight. Counterintuitively, the lighter the fuel, the greater the thrust.

Liquid oxygen is sixteen times heavier than hydrogen, so using it to react with hydrogen in ordinary chemical rockets decreases the ejected velocity by about a factor of one fourth. Altogether, nuclear heating of pure hydrogen seems likely to yield thrust about two to three times that of the best chemical rockets.

The reactor was about the size of a compact car and produced power comparable with the Hoover Dam, from a cold start in a matter of moments. Liquid hydrogen first cooled the nozzle, then flowed past long core rods of uranium coated with graphite, heating and expanding in the nozzle: basically, a flying steam kettle.

But it never got to fly. The no-nukes-in-space treaty of the early 1970s stopped development; we now know that the Soviets had gotten the same results as the rather cheap (1.5 billion dollars) U.S. program.

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No Nukes makes no sense in space. Of course no nuclear reactor would drive the direct liftoff; rather, they would turn on in high orbit.

They are basically safe. Reactors can even survive explosion of their booster carriers on the pad without spilling uranium. In deep space, any radioactive content mixed into the exhausted hydrogen would blow away on the solar wind.

Such engines could deliver robot vessels to the outer solar system in a small fraction of the decade-long flight paths our probes use now. Their higher efficiency allows faster trajectories.

This greatly cuts the labor cost of keeping missions flying for so long before they gather much data, and prevents tortured flybys of Venus and Jupiter to pick up small velocity increments by "bouncing off" their gravitational wells. Such repeated Venus flybys probably jammed Galileo's main antenna.

For the same price, cost-out studies show that a nuclear rocket could drive about a 60-to-70-percent heavier payload to Mars. Such savings give us not only a cheaper program, they produce the next generation of exploration vessels. Reactors are small and can easily be made larger, propelling big missions to anywhere in the solar system.

Whatever Mars yields, economically or scientifically, we could deploy a complex response with such ships. Nukes are the essential next step. The nation which deploys them will probably define the next century of space development. What begins with voyages of exploration, driven by the quest for Martian life, could become a far larger agenda.

Of course, many skeptics will find merely searching for life not enticing. Oh, maybe later, but first let's fix our cities and feed the world and...

The primary "maybe later" argument against going anywhere is basically a usually high-minded form of *what's in it for me*? Some sensible replies are already clear, too.

There are plenty of reasons to believe Mars will be a valuable, perhaps essential asset in the next century. It is the only Earthlike planet, though admittedly that isn't a tough competition. Unlike the thoroughly baked worlds of Mercury, Venus and our moon, Mars has water, perhaps enough to cover it in a sea several meters deep. The water is locked up in permafrost, alas, but thermal vents from the warm core probably feed hot reservoirs below the chilly crust.

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Mars has vast stores of the light chemical essentials, particularly gases and fluids rich in hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen. Its atmosphere is 95% carbon dioxide at one percent of our pressure, but that is still enough to block the radiation of solar flares. It is the only other planet where simple greenhouses on the surface could grow food by sunlight.

Certainly Mars had an era of vulcanism and running water, probably even a large northern ocean — all pointing toward accumulation of mineral ores. The Martian resources are probably vast and different, spread over an area equalling the land area of Earth.

As well, Mars is a far better platform for exploring and exploiting the asteroid belt than either our moon or the Earth. It is energetically and spatially far closer. The vast hoard of metals in the asteroid belt, when eventually mined or even moved into Earth orbit and used for artificial space stations, will be worked from Mars.

But for me, the possibility that *this generation* can find out if a great, cosmic struggle has been fought across the drying plains of Mars, by life alien yet valiant, is a consuming goal. In those vast red deserts we may find only bleak blowing sands. Or we could search out lingering traces of a great epic, a long slow cosmic tragedy as the blunt facts of gravity and gases strangled young life just getting its start. Or more optimistically, by plumbing deeply, we may even uncover strange life forms as old as our own.

Which will it be? We can answer these questions *now*.

They impinge on immense riddles about evolution itself. Is there a bias in life's variations favoring greater complexity? Some biologists dislike talk about evolution "going anywhere," seeing it as massively quirky and accidental. Is its vaunted progress really just a random motion away from necessarily simple beginnings, not pointed toward inherently advantageous complexity?

Or is Earth's growing intricacy inevitable? On Mars the anaerobes have had a chance to live on without the fast-paced competition of the oxygen breathers, who have come to special prominence here in the last billion years. There is some evidence that the gradually higher oxygen content of our air led to the rather sudden ("Cambrian explosion") emergence of bony structures, because collagen could form once the oxygen reached a critical

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level. Is this truly so, or are there other, oxygen starved tricks?

These are the sorts of larger issues genuinely different life could address. Mars is the only spot in the solar system where these questions might find answers. (Except, perhaps, the icy moons of Europa and Titan.)

In 1859 Darwin concluded his *The Origin of Species* with a reflection that rings still:

> There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

And perhaps not just this planet, one must add.

Comments and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Timothy Zahn has published sixty short stories, sixteen novels, and three short fiction collections. His novella "Cascade Point" won the Hugo award, and his three Star Wars novels — which are credited with reviving interest in Star Wars — made the New York Times *bestseller list. His most recent novel,* Conquerer's Legacy, *is the final volume of his Conquerors Trilogy.*

About "The Art of War," Tim writes, "This story started as a letter from Kris Rusch, who'd been researching her upcoming Star Wars book and had come across my character Grand Admiral Thrawn and his interest in artwork. She found the idea intriguing and suggested to me that the juxtaposition of art with warfare was something I might want to consider exploring a little more in a non-Star Wars setting.

"This is what came out of that exploration. It's not exactly what either she or I had in mind; but, hey, I guess that's what happens when you start dealing with Art."

The Art of War

By Timothy Zahn

YOU KNOW HOW IT ENDED, of course. Or at least you know the official version of how it ended, which isn't quite the same. I imagine all the parties involved would have preferred to completely bury that first incident; I know for my part that I was instructed in no uncertain terms to keep quiet about what I knew. But you can't completely hush up a debacle that cost sixty-three men their lives. Especially not when one of them was a Supreme Convocant of the United Ethnos of Humanity.

So you know more or less how it ended. It's time you learned how it began.

It began with my eighteenth birthday, and my parents' desire to do something really special for my nineteenth year. The Year of YouthJourneying, we called it on New Ararat: a brief interval between the end of Institute and the beginning of life as adults. Most of my friends were going the traditional routes: taking career-sample apprenticeships, joining volunteer groups, doing YouthJourney tours around New Ararat, or —

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for the more adventuresome — signing aboard starfreighters to travel the whole sector.

My parents outdid them all. Somehow, I still don't know how, they wangled me a one-year appointment as aide to Magnell Sutherlan, Convocant from New Ararat to the Supreme Convocation of the UnEthHu. My friends were all kelly-green with envy; naturally, I milked it shamelessly for all it was worth.

It didn't take long for the shine to wear off, though. Zurich was crowded and noisy, with a crime rate probably a thousand times that of our whole district back home. The Convocation Complex itself was huge, practically impossible not to get lost in, and populated by some of the most snidely condescending people I'd ever met. And Convocant Sutherlan, far from being a respected, sharp-edged lawmaker the way the newspages always portrayed him, was old, tired, and completely detached from what was going on. Just treading water, really, until this final term was over and he could go home.

It was not exactly an atmosphere that bred enthusiasm. As a result, whenever there was travel to be done — whether secure document delivery, repre-meetings, or personal errands — I was always the first of Sutherlan's aide corps to volunteer. A fair percentage of those first few months were spent crisscrossing Earth in a suborbital or hopping between various planets of the UnEthHu in one or another of Sutherlan's official half-wings.

And so it was that, four months into my tenure, I found myself two hundred parsecs from Earth on the Kailth world of Quibsh.

Everyone in the UnEthHu knows where Quibsh is now, of course, but back then even most professional politicians had never heard of the place. No real surprise; Quibsh was a fairly useless border world, with an unimpressive list of resources and an outer crust that was a staggering collection of tectonic instabilities. The Kailth had put a couple of minor military outposts there to watch over a population of a few million hardy colonists, about half of whom resided in a single city in one of the more fertile valleys. The Kailth and UnEthHu had made contact about ten years previously, but with the Dynad's main attention focused on the ongoing Pindorshi trade disputes, we hadn't given the Kailth much more than passing notice.

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The diplomatic corps had installed a one-man consulate in the main Quibsh city, where I was supposed to pick up some research documents Convocant Sutherlan had ordered as a favor to a constituent. The pilotcomp landed the half-wing behind the consulate — it had its own drop beacon — and I presented my ID and request to the consular agent, a wrinkled man named Clave Verst who, like Sutherlan, seemed to be marking time until retirement. He got me the documents, and I was preparing to head back to the half-wing when I took a second look at the request form and noticed a hand-written note asking me to also bring back a case of Kailth mixed cooking brandies. There wasn't a single shell of the stuff to be had in the consulate, the nearest potables dealer was a kilometer away, and Verst made it abundantly clear he wasn't about to waste his own time on such a frivolous errand. So, armed with a fistful of detailed instructions and a stomachful of queasiness, I headed out alone.

The spider-web maze of streets was surprisingly crowded — I thought more than once that the entire population must have decided to go out walking or driving that afternoon — but I'd bumped shoulders with other species before and it wasn't as bad as I'd been afraid it would be. For a small fraction of the pedestrians I seemed to be a minor curiosity; for the rest, I was something to be ignored completely.

I had just turned what I hoped was the last corner when I spotted Tawni.

She was probably the last thing I would have expected to see out there among all those lizard-skinned, bumblebee-faced Kailth. A human woman, of medium height and slender build, with an exotically cut cascade of black hair that at the moment was obscuring most of her face as she leaned into the open engine compartment of what looked like an ancient Pemberkif Scroller. The vehicle was parked beside the curb, or else had summarily died there. On all sides, completely oblivious to her plight, streams of Kailth shuffled past, breaking around her like a river around a rock.

Protocol probably dictated that I call back to the consulate, report the situation, and then continue on with my errand while Verst handled it. But she was a human, and in trouble, and I was an aide to a UnEthHu Convocant. More importantly, I was nineteen, and what I could see of her looked pretty attractive. Working my way through the traffic, I headed over.

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I got through the last rivulet of pedestrians and stepped to her side. "Having some trouble?" I asked inanely.

She looked up, giving me my first look at a face that more than met my expectations: young and beautiful, in a dark and distinctly exotic way, though at the moment she was almost at the point of tears from the frustration of her situation. A delicate line — scar or tattoo, I couldn't tell which — arched almost invisibly from the bridge of her nose over her right eyebrow, curving around her cheekbone and past the corner of her lip to disappear into the dimple at the point of her chin. From one of the frontier Ridgeline worlds, I guessed, where humanity's races had been mixed in unusual combinations and body ornamentation could get a little bizarre.

And where, I belatedly remembered, Anglish was not always the language of choice. For a second she just gazed up at me, her face not seeming to register my question; and I was trying to figure out a Plan B when my words suddenly seemed to click. "Yes," she said. Her accent was soft and delicate and as exotic as the rest of her. "Can you help me?"

"I can try," I said, peering into the engine compartment. It was a Scroller, all right, though from the looks of it whoever had traded it to her had gotten the better end of the deal. I was just reaching in to check the motivor cables when, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the pedestrian stream falter and looked up to see what was going on.

Rounding another corner, heading across the intersection, were a pair of Kailth warriors.

I'd seen pictures of Kailth warriors at the Convocation Complex, vids secretly taken by SkyForce Intelligence at the Chompre and TyTiernian pacifications near the edges of the Kailthaermil Empire. We hadn't tangled with them yet ourselves, but there was a widespread feeling in the Complex back rooms that it was just a matter of time before we did. The Kailth controlled a lot of territory, with a fair number of non-Kailth under their control, and that almost always spelled trouble.

Besides which — the more cynical argument went — the Pindorshi situation wouldn't last forever, and wars and conflicts were too politically useful for politicians to stay away from them for long.

Watching the SkyForce reports in the safety of a Zurich screening room, I had hoped those cynics were wrong. Standing there in the middle of a Quibsh street, I desperately hoped they were wrong. On telephoto

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vids, Kailth warriors were impressive; up close and personal, they were damn near terrifying. Armored up to their headcrests in full combat suits, walking in lockstep, they were straight out of a xenophobic newspage docu-diatribe. Or straight out of hell.

The two warriors spotted me at roughly the same time I spotted them, and in perfect unison they shifted direction toward us. Instinctively, I moved closer to the girl — some chivalric idea about sticking together, I suppose — and I threw her a quick glance to see how she was handling this.

And paused for a longer look. She was gazing at the warriors, but the look on her face wasn't the knee-shaking trepidation I was feeling. She was smiling, the tension lines in her face already starting to smooth out.

It was a look of relief. Maybe even adoration.

"You," one of the Kailth said in passable Anglish. "Human male. What are you doing?"

My tongue tangled momentarily over my teeth. "I — she's having trouble with her Scroller," I managed. "I stopped to help."

He held out his right hand. "Identity."

I fumbled out my ID folder and handed it over, wondering nervously whether a UnEthHu Convocation ID would be an asset or a liability here. My eyes drifted to the lumpy black weapon strapped to his left side, not much bigger than the 5mm slugkicker pistol I used to plink targets with when I was a kid. At its highest setting, this particular sidearm could allegedly drop a two-story brick building with a single shot.

The warrior studied the ID for what seemed like an inordinately long time. Then, closing it, he handed it back and turned his insectine gaze on the woman. "Does he bother you, Citizen-Three?" he demanded.

"Not at all, Warrior-Citizen-One," she said, bowing her head. "It is as he said: he paused to help me."

I stared at her, suddenly almost oblivious to the warriors. *Citizen-Three*?

"Do you wish our assistance?" the warrior asked.

The girl looked at me. "No," she said. "I will be fine. Thank you for your concern."

The warrior threw one more long look at me. Then, in lockstep once more, the two of them passed us by and disappeared down another street.

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I looked at the girl, my stomach churning. "He called you Citizen-Three," I said. "Citizen-Three of what?"

"Of the Kailthaermil Empire," she said, as if it was obvious. "I and my people are third-citizens." She reached up and touched the tattoo line on her face.

"Your people," I said, dimly realizing I was starting to blither like an idiot. But I couldn't help it. "But you're human. Aren't you?"

"Yes," she said. "My people were saved from invaders by the Kailthaermil many years ago. For that we will forever be grateful to them."

I frowned harder...and then, with a sudden jolt, I got it.

She and her people were verlorens.

"Would you be willing," I asked carefully, "to take me to your people?"

For the first time a shadow of uncertainty seemed to cross her face. But then the shadow passed, and she smiled. "Of course," she said.

"Thank you." I cleared my throat. "By the way, my name's Stane Markand."

"Stane Markand," she repeated, bowing her head as she had toward the Kailth warriors. "I am Tawnikakalina."

"Tawnikakalina," I said. It didn't sound nearly as melodious as when she said it. But with any luck, I figured I might just have a chance to practice.

WE SPENT the next half hour kluge-rigging the Scroller back to health, then nursing it over to the consulate. There I had it loaded aboard my half-wing, informing the pilotcomp and Consular Agent Verst that I'd be making one more stop on Quibsh and postponing my departure from the planet for a day or two. The pilotcomp, programmed with flexibility in mind, took the change in plans in stride. Verst obviously couldn't have cared less.

It was about two hundred kilometers to where Tawni's people had been settled in a scattering of small villages beneath a line of squat volcanoes. We put down on a section of lava flow near Tawni's village, and by the time we had the Scroller rolled out, a small mob of her people had gathered around the half-wing to see what was going on. She explained the situation to them in a few musical sentences, and with a dozen

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enthusiastic young men pushing the Scroller ahead of them, we all went down to her village.

I don't know how widespread the term *verloren* ever became around the UnEthHu. It was mostly an academic word, borrowed from the Old German word for *lost*, that was used to describe the phenomenon of Earth-born human beings or their relics discovered dozens or even hundreds of parsecs away from Earth with no apparent way for them to have gotten there. Genetic and linguistic studies were inconclusive, but they suggested that the original ancestors of the groups had left Earth some six to ten thousand years earlier. Whether the colonies had been deliberately planted by some unknown starfaring race, or whether the verlorens were the equivalent of white rats discarded after an experiment, no one knew.

There were thirty-one known archaeological digs that showed evidence of a long-past human presence, another dozen or so scatterings of primitive humans at Iron Age level or below, and three genuinely thriving verloren societies. With Tawni's people, I'd apparently discovered a fourth.

"Our history on Sagtt'a goes back to the Great Rain of Fire," she explained as she showed me around her village. "Our ancestors sought refuge from the fire inside a strange mountain. When they came out, the land and the stars had changed."

I nodded. Two of the other verloren cultures also had a Rain of Fire in their histories. "That must be when you were taken from Earth."

"Yes, though it was many generations before we realized what had actually happened," Tawni said. "Not until after the first invasion."

"The Kailth?"

She shook her head, her hair shimmering in the sunlight with the movement. "No, the invaders were called the Orraci Matai," she said. "Large creatures with many fish-like fins. They occupied Sagtt'a for four generations before they were overthrown by the Xa, who ruled us for thirty years before they were in turn overthrown by the Phashiskar. They stayed three generations before they were conquered by the Baal'ariai, in a terrible battle that killed a quarter of our people."

It was an old, old pattern: innocent people caught in a trade route or strategic power position, being fought over by every ambitious

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empire-builder who came along. "So the Kailth are just the latest batch of conquerors?"

"The Kailthaermil are not conquerors," she said. "They are liberators. They forced the Aoeemme from Sagtt'a, but then pulled their own warriors back to orbiting stations and proclaimed that our people were once again free to rule ourselves."

"Ah." Another old pattern, though one that was far less frequently seen: conquerors who were smart enough to allow local self-rule in exchange for cooperation and the payment of tribute. It was more efficient than trying to run everything directly, and you could always go in and stomp them if they tried pushing their autonomy too far. "This was in exchange for certain rules of conduct from your society?"

"All societies have rules of conduct," she pointed out.

"Of course," I said. "How much tribute do you pay each year?"

She stopped and frowned at me. "Why do you persist in thinking ill of the Kailthaermil?" she asked. "Have they done ill to you?"

"Well, no, not exactly," I had to admit. "Actually, we don't know all that much about them yet. But we know they've conquered a large number of other races and peoples, and we've seen enough conquerors to know how they usually behave."

"But you do not know the Kailthaermil," she insisted. "They do not demand our lives or our property. Only some of our artwork. And for this they give us safety."

Aha, I thought, there it is. Artwork. "What artwork?" I asked.

She pointed toward a squat volcano with a wide crater. "I will show you. Come."

I was not, to say the least, thrilled at the prospect of climbing into a volcano crater, particularly one that was smoldering restlessly with sulfur and the occasional burst of steam from some vent or other. Tawni's people obviously felt differently: there were already five others moving briskly around the crater at various tasks as we entered through a gap in the side of the cone.

"This is our curing chamber," Tawni said at my side. "Over there — " she pointed to a rough shelf along one side of the wall — "are the calices."

I stared at them, forgetting the sulfur corroding my lungs, forgetting even that I was standing inside a volcano. The calices were that riveting.

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Roughly spherical in shape, about twenty centimeters across each, they were composed of intricate twistings of brilliant gold metal fibers interwoven with equally slender twistings of some richly dark-red material. There were eight of them lined up on the shelf, with the kind of small variations that said they were individually handmade.

"Come," Tawni said softly, taking my arm. "Come and see."

We walked across the uneven rock to the shelf. Up close, I could see that the dark red strands were some kind of wood or plant fiber, not quite as flexible as the metal wires but with a stiffness that introduced a textural counterpoint into the design. At the very center of the woven threads was some kind of crystalline core that reflected the gold and red that swirled around it, as well as adding a pale blue-white to the color scheme.

It took me a while to find my voice. "They're beautiful," I said. My voice came out a husky whisper.

"Thank you," Tawni said. She took a step closer to the shelf and gently ran a hand down around the top of one of them. "They are unique, Stane, among all the worlds. Or at least those worlds which have been visited by the Kailthaermil. The wood is from a tree that grows in only five places on Sagtt'a, and the crystals and metal are nearly as rare. Each calix can take a crafter a year to create."

She lowered her hand, almost reluctantly. "But the result is so beautiful. So very beautiful."

I nodded. "And this is what the Kailth take as their tribute?"

"They take a few," Tawni said. "No more than a tenth of those we make." Her face took on a slightly stubborn expression. "And for this small price they give us protection from all who would invade us, and leave us otherwise in peace. Do you still wish to speak ill of them?"

As tributes went, I had to admit, this was a pretty minor one. "No," I conceded.

"Good." The stubbornness vanished and she smiled, the sun coming out from behind a threatening storm cloud. "Then let us go back to the village. The Elders will wish to speak with you."

I wound up spending nearly two days in Tawni's village. Her people were amazingly open and trusting, willing to let me see anything I wanted and to answer any question I could think to ask. This group had only

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recently been brought to Quibsh from their world of Sagtt'a, I learned, though the Kailth had previously set up other human colonies on worlds that had the necessary volcanic activity for the calix curing process. Among the six hundred people in this colony were twelve calix artisans and twenty apprentices, of whom Tawni was apparently one of the most promising.

It was clear that there was an enormous amount we needed to learn about these people, but it was equally clear that I had neither the time nor the expertise to handle the job. So after those two days, I reluctantly told Tawni I had to leave. She thanked me again for rescuing her from her balky Scroller — which the village mechanics still hadn't gotten working yet — extracted a promise from me to come back if I could, and offered me a parting gift.

A calix.

"No," I protested, holding the sculpture up to the sunlight. It wasn't nearly as heavy as I would have expected, with a pleasantly tingling sensation where I held it. "Tawni, I couldn't possibly take this. It wouldn't be right."

"Why not?" she asked, that stubborn look of hers threatening to cloud her face again. "You are my friend. Can a friend not give a friend a gift?"

"Of course," I said. "But won't the Kailth be angry with you?"

"Why would they?" she countered. "They will receive those they are due. They do not own all calices, Stane. Nor do they own us."

"I know, but — " I floundered. "But this is just too much. I didn't do enough for you to justify a gift like this."

"Do you then reduce friendship to a balance of plus and minus?" she asked quietly. "That does not sound like a friendship to be cherished."

I sighed. But she had me, and we both knew it. And to be honest, I didn't really want to give up the calix anyway. "All right," I said. "I accept, with thanks. And I *will* be sure to come visit you again some day."

It was a four-day voyage back to Earth. I spent a fair amount of that time dictating my report on this new verloren colony, adding my thoughts and impressions to the running record the half-wing's sensors had taken. I spent an equal amount of time studying the calix.

I'd seen right away, of course, the ethereal beauty that had been frozen into the sculpture. But it wasn't until I began spending time with the calix

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that I realized that there was far more to it than I'd realized. There was the metalwork, for starters: a filigree of threads far more intricate than it had appeared at first sight. I found I could spend hours just tracing various lines from start to finish with my eyes, then seeing if I could track them backwards again without getting sidetracked by one of the other loops or branchings.

The intertwined wood fibers were just as fascinating. Virtually never the same color twice, they had a varying texture that ranged from smooth and warm to sandpapery and oddly cool. After the first day, my searching hands found two spots on opposite sides that seemed to particularly fit my palms and fingertips, and from that point on I nearly always held the calix that way.

Then there was the crystal that peeked out from the center. Like the wood and metal, it never seemed to look quite the same way twice. From one angle it would look like nothing more esoteric than a lump of quartz; from another it might seem to be pale sapphire or diamond or even delicately stained glass. Sometimes even when I returned to the same angle the crystal would look different than it had before.

But the most enigmatic part of all was the way the calix hummed at me.

It was a day before I even noticed the sound, and two more before I finally figured out that what it was doing was resonating to the sound of my voice. Like everything else about the sculpture, it never seemed to react quite the same way twice, though I spent a good two hours at one point talking, humming, and singing as I tried to pin down a pattern. If there was one there, I never found it.

I reached Zurich, explained my delay to Convocant Sutherlan, filed my report, and sat back to wait for the inevitable flurry of attention that the discovery of a new verloren culture would surely stir up.

The inevitable didn't happen. Oh, there was a ripple of interest from the academic community, and a couple of government-endorsed artists stopped by to look briefly and condescendingly at the calix. But for the most part the Supreme Convocation could only come up with the political equivalent of a distracted pat on the head. With the Pindorshi situation still dominating the firstlines in the newspages, the Convocants were apparently not interested in anything so mundane as a long-lost human colony.

I can't tell you how frustrating it was, at least at first. This was, after

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all, probably the only shot I would ever have at interstellar fame. But gradually I began to realize that all this official indifference was probably for the best. The alternative would have meant a horde of Convocant aides and factfinders descending like locusts on Quibsh; and having worked with some of those aides, that wasn't something I would wish on anyone. Particularly not the friendly, naive people of Tawni's village.

So I did my best to philosophically put it behind me, decided to concentrate instead on finding a way to get back to Quibsh some day soon, and settled back to endure the remainder of my appointment.

Until the day, two weeks later, when Convocant Lantic Devaro came into the office.

The newspages painted Sutherlan as an elder statesman, and they lied. They painted Devaro as an aspiring future leader, and lied again, only in the opposite direction. To say Devaro was aspiring was like saying a Siltech Brahma bulldozer can push dirt around. Devaro was a charismatic man; clever, powerful, and almost pathologically ambitious. Rumor was that his ultimate goal was to challenge the blood-line tradition of the Dynad long enough to claim one of the two seats for himself, something that had never happened in two centuries of Dynad rule. The private back-rooms consensus was that he had an even-money chance of making it.

I don't know what exactly he came to Sutherlan's office for that day. In hindsight, though, it was obviously just a pretext anyway. Even as he announced himself at the outer receptionist's station his eyes were surveying the aide room; and when he emerged from Sutherlan's private offices ten minutes later, he crossed directly to my desk.

"So," he said as I scrambled to my feet, "you're the one."

"Sir?" I asked, not entirely sure what he meant and not daring to make any assumptions.

"The young man who discovered that new verloren group," he amplified. "Good work, that, and excellent follow-up."

"Thank you, sir," I said, trying not to stutter. Praise for underlings was almost unheard of in Convocant Sutherlan's office.

"You're quite welcome." Devaro nodded toward the calix, sitting on a corner of my desk where I placed it every morning when I came in. "I take it that's the sculpture you brought back?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "It's called a calix. Uh...would you like...?"

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"Thank you," he said, crossing around behind the desk. Sliding a hand beneath the calix — he was wearing informal daytime gloves, I noticed — he picked it up.

For a long moment he gazed at and into it. I stood silently, fighting the urge to plead with him to be careful. He turned it around one way and then the other, then set it back on its stand. "Interesting," he said, turning to me again. "Your report said the Kailth accept these as part of the verlorens' tribute."

"According to Tawni, it's all they take," I told him, breathing a little easier now that the calix was safe. "They must like art."

"Yes," he murmured, gazing at me with a thoughtful intensity that made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. "Interesting. Well, good day."

"Good day, Convocant Devaro," I said.

I watched him stride out, feeling the other aides' looks of envy on the back of my neck as I basked in the warm glow of triumph, small though it might be. Finally, someone in authority who'd actually noted and appreciated what I'd done.

The warm glow lasted the rest of the day, through the evening, and right up until I opened my eyes the next morning.

To find the calix gone from my night table.

There were four separate reception stations along the approach to Devaro's inner offices. I strode past all four of them without stopping, to the consternation of the various receptionists, and was about two steps ahead of Convocation Security when I shoved open the ornate doors and stomped into Devaro's presence.

"Ah — there you are," he said before I could even get a word out. "Come in; I've been expecting you."

"Where is it?" I demanded, starting toward him.

"It's perfectly safe," he assured me, his eyes shifting to a spot over my shoulder. "No, it's all right — let him be. And leave us."

I looked behind me, to see two guards reluctantly lower their tranglers and back out of the room. "Now," Devaro said as they closed the doors. "You seem upset."

"You had my calix stolen from my apartment," I said, turning back to glare at him. "Don't try to deny it."

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His eyebrows lifted slightly, as if denial was the furthest thing from his mind. "I had it borrowed," he corrected. "I wanted to run a few tests on it, and that seemed the quietest way to go about it."

My heart momentarily seized up. "What kind of tests? What are you doing to it?"

"It's perfectly safe," Devaro said again, standing up. From across the office a door opened and two white-jacketed women stepped into the room. "Don't worry, we'll return it to you soon. While we're waiting, we'd like to run some tests on you, as well."

"What sort of tests?" I asked, eying the doctors warily.

"Painless ones, I assure you," Devaro said, crossing to me and taking my arm in a friendly but compelling grip. "You'll need to sign some forms first — the doctors will show you."

"But I'm supposed to be working," I protested as he led me over to the door where the doctors waited. "Convocant Sutherlan is expecting me to be at my desk — "

"I've already taken care of Convocant Sutherlan," Devaro said. "Come, now. You won't feel a thing."

I DIDN'T, but that was probably only because the first thing they did when we got to the examination room was put me to sleep.

I woke to find myself lying on a rolltable moving down a deserted corridor. There was an empty growling in my stomach, an unpleasant tingling in my fingertips and forehead, and a strange difficulty in focusing my eyes. One of the two doctors was riding along with me, watching my face as I came to, and I considered asking her where we were going. But I didn't feel like talking, and anyway her expression didn't encourage questions.

A few minutes later we passed through a door and I found myself back in Devaro's office. The Convocant was sitting in his chair, feet propped up informally, gazing at his desk display. "Ah — there you are," he said as the rolltable crossed to him. "That will be all, Doctor."

"Yes, sir," she said, waiting until the rolltable had come to a halt beside the desk before stepping off and disappearing back through the door.

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"It's been a long day," Devaro commented. "How are you feeling?"

"A little groggy," I said, carefully sitting up on the edge of the rolltable. There was a moment of dizziness, but it passed quickly. "How long was I out?"

"As I said, all day," Devaro said, nodding toward his window. To my shock, I saw it was black with night. "It's a little after eight-thirty."

No wonder my stomach was growling. "Can I go home now?" I asked.

"You'll want to eat first," Devaro said. "I'm having some food sent up. Tell me, have you ever had a brainscan done before?"

"I don't think so," I said. "Is that what they did to me in there?"

"Oh, they did a little of everything," he said. "A complete brainscan, including a neural network mapping and a personality matrix profile. Do you always hold the calix at the same spots?"

"Usually," I said. "Not always. Why?"

"Did your friend Tawnikakalina ever tell you how she and her people learned Anglish?"

The abrupt changes of subject were starting to make my head hurt. "She didn't know," I told him. "All she knew was that the Kailth had some of her group learn the language when they decided to set up a colony on Quibsh."

Devaro's lip twisted in a grimace. "It was the Church," he said, spitting the word out like a curse. "One of those illegal little under-the-table deals they're always making with alien governments. The Kailth apparently took a group of priestians in to Sagtt'a a few years ago to inspect the verloren colony."

"I see," I said, keeping my voice neutral. The Convocation and Church were always going head-to-head on something, usually with the Church taking the government to task for violating some basic humanitarian principle. The fact that the majority of UnEthHu citizens generally supported the Church on those issues irritated the Convocants no end. "So then you already knew about those verlorens."

"Hardly," Devaro growled. "The Church hadn't deigned to tell us about them. I did some backtracking after your report came in and was able to put the pieces together. Tell me, how does the calix make you feel?"

Another abrupt change of topic. With an effort, I tried to think. "It's soothing, mostly. Helps me relax when I'm tense."

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"Does it ever do the opposite?" he asked. "Invigorate you when you're tired?"

"Well..." I frowned. "Actually, yes. It does, sometimes."

"In other words," Devaro said, his eyes hard on me, "it creates two completely opposite effects. Doesn't that strike you as a little strange?"

It *was* odd, come to think about it. "I suppose so," I said, a little lamely. "I guess I just assumed it was mirroring my moods somehow."

He smiled, a tight humorless expression. "Not mirroring them," he said softly. "Creating them."

The skin on the back of my neck began to crawl. "What do you mean?"

He reached over and swiveled his desk display around to face me. There was a graph there, with a bewildering array of multicolored curves. "We did a full analysis of the calix," he said. "Paying particular attention to the places where you say you always hold it. We took some five-micron core samples from the wood fibers there; and it turns out they have an interesting and distinctive substratum chemical composition."

His face hardened. "A composition which, after it's been run through the proper chemo-mathematical transforms, shows a remarkable resemblance to the neural network pattern we took from you today."

I didn't know what half those words meant. But they sounded ominous. "What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means that the 'gift' your friend Tawnikakalina gave you isn't a gift," he said bluntly. "It's a weapon."

I gazed out the window at the black sky over the city, my empty stomach feeling suddenly sick. A weapon. From Tawni? "No," I said, looking back at the Convocant. "No, I can't believe that, sir. Tawni wouldn't do something like that to me. She couldn't."

He snorted contemptuously. "This from your long and exhaustive experience with different cultures, no doubt?"

"No, but — "

"You'll be trying to tell me next that it's the Kailth who are behind it all," he went on. "And that the verloren artists themselves have no idea whatsoever what it is they've created with these calices of theirs."

I grimaced. I had indeed been wondering exactly along those lines. Hearing it put that way, it did sound rather ridiculous.

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"No, it's a grand plot, all right," Devaro went on darkly. "And if the Kailth are taking ten percent of the verlorens' calices every year, they must be using them pretty extensively. Maybe as a prelude to all their conquests." He shook his head wonderingly. "Artwork used as a weapon. What an insidious concept."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but I still don't understand. What is the calix doing?"

Devaro sighed, swiveling his display back around toward him. "We don't know for sure. If we had a branscan record for you prior to your trip to Quibsh — but we don't. All we have to go on is this." He waved a hand at the display. "And what this says is that, through your contact with the wood fibers, the calix is changing you into something that matches its own pre-set matrix. Turning you into God alone knows what."

The room seemed suddenly very cold. "But I don't feel any different," I protested. "I mean...I should feel *something*. Shouldn't I?"

He leaned back in his seat and steepled his fingertips together. "You ever try to cook a frog?" he asked. "Probably not. Doubt anyone has, really, but it makes a good story. They say that if you drop a live frog into a pot of boiling water, it'll hop right out again. But if you put it in cold water and slowly heat the pot to boiling, the frog just sits there until it cooks. It can't detect the slow temperature change. You see?"

I saw, all right. "Is that what the calix is doing? Slow-cooking me?"

He shrugged. "It's trying. Whether it's going to succeed...that we don't yet know."

The room fell silent again. I stared out the window, mentally taking inventory of my mind, the way you would poke around your skin checking for bruises. I still couldn't find anything that felt strange.

But then, maybe the calix hadn't heated the water up enough. Yet. "Why me?" I asked.

"A mistake, obviously," Devaro said. "The Kailth probably assumed you'd give the calix to Convocant Sutherlan instead of keeping it for yourself. Or else they thought you were more important than you really are, though how they could make that kind of blunder I don't know."

"So what do we do?" I asked. "Do we — " I hesitated " — destroy the calix?"

He eyed me closely. "Is that what you want?"

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"I — " I broke off, the quick answer sticking unexpectedly in my throat. Of course we should destroy it — the thing was clearly dangerous. And yet, I felt oddly reluctant to make such a decision. It was such a magnificent piece of art.

And it had been a gift from Tawni.

"Actually, it's a moot point," Devaro said into my indecision. "I'm not sure destroying it would do any good. The places where you hold the calix have clearly had the greatest effect on you; but you said yourself you've touched other spots on it, so you've probably already picked up at least some of the programming embedded there."

Programming. The word sent a shiver up my back. "What are we going to do?"

"Three things," Devaro said. "First of all, we don't panic. You've been affected, but we're on to them now, so we can keep an eye on you. Second, we need to get more information on these calices in general." He cocked an eyebrow. "Which means you're going to have to go back to Quibsh and get us some more of them."

I felt my mouth drop open. "Back to Quibsh?"

"You have to," Devaro said, his voice quiet but compelling. "You've met the people there — you're the only one who can pretend it's just a social visit. Moreover, they gave you a calix, so it's reasonable you'd be back to buy more as gifts."

This was coming a little too fast. "Gifts?"

"Certainly." Devaro smiled slyly. "What better way to guarantee their cooperation than to tell them you want calices to give to prominent members of the Convocation?"

There was a tone at the door, and a rollcart came in with two covered dishes on it. "Ah — dinner has arrived," Devaro announced, standing up and pointing the rollcart toward one side of the room where a bench table was now unfolding itself from the wall. "Let's eat before it gets cold."

"Yes, sir," I said, sliding off the rolltable and heading over. The delectable aromas rising from the plates made my stomach hurt even more. "You said there were three things we were going to do."

"Yes, I did," he said, setting the plates onto opposite ends of the table. "The third thing is for us to learn exactly what the calix's programming

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does. Unfortunately, core samples and structural analyses can get us only so far. Which leaves only one practical approach."

I nodded. I'd already guessed this one. "You want me to keep the calix," I said. "And let it keep doing whatever it's doing to me."

"We'll start that phase as soon as you get back from Quibsh," Devaro said. "But don't worry, we'll be with you every step of the way. We'll take a complete brainscan once a week — more often if it seems justified — as well as monitoring your general health."

It made sense, I supposed. It was also about as unpleasant a prospect as I'd ever faced in my whole life. "What about my work?"

"This *is* your work from now on," Devaro said. "You're on my staff now — I made the arrangements with Sutherlan earlier today."

"I see," I said, walking over to the table. The aromas didn't smell quite so good anymore.

"You have to do this, Markand," Devaro said quietly. It was, as near as I could remember, the first time he'd ever called me by my name. "It's the only way we're going to get a handle on this Kailth plot. The only way to protect the UnEthHu."

I sighed. "Patriotism. You found my weak spot, all right."

"It's a weak spot many of us have," Devaro said. He gestured to the table. "Come; let's eat. We still have a great many things to discuss."

FOUR DAYS LATER, I was back on Quibsh.

I'd spent the whole trip worrying about how I was going to hide from Tawni the sudden change in the way I now perceived her and her people. No longer as friends, but as enemies.

Fortunately, the issue never came up. I'd barely stepped out of the half-wing into the late afternoon sunlight when Tawni was there in front of me, all but knocking me over as she threw herself into an enthusiastic full-body hug, chattering away in my ear in an exuberant jumble of Anglish and her own language. When she finally broke free and took my hand a half dozen of her people had joined us, and amid a general flurry of greetings we all tromped together down to the village. By the time we got there, I found myself slipping back into the old friendly, easygoing mode.

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But only on the surface. Beneath the smiles and pleasantries I was on nervous and cautious guard, seeing everything here with new eyes. Behind every verloren face I now searched for evidence of hidden cunning; beneath every word strained to hear a tell-tale echo of deceit.

And yet, even as I tried to keep Devaro's stern face in front of me as inspiration, I could feel doubts draining my resolve away. Either their deceit was so ingrained, so expertly hidden that I couldn't detect even a breath of it, or else Devaro's assessment about them was wrong. Perhaps they were indeed just as they appeared, open and honest and innocent. Perhaps they really *didn't* know what the calices did, or else the programming aspect was something the Kailth had covertly introduced into the original design.

Or perhaps it was that same programming that was the true source of my doubts. The calix, whispering to its frog that the water wasn't warm at all.

It was an hour before the last of the greeters drifted away. I was feeling a little squeamish about being alone with Tawni, not at all sure I could fake the friendship and affection I'd once felt for her. Which I still wanted to feel for her. Fortunately, that moment was put off by her wish to show me the changes that had taken place in the fruit tree grove bordering the village while we still had the afternoon light.

"I am so pleased you came back to see us," she commented as she led me along a twisting path between the trees. "You had said you might not be able to return for a long time."

"Things just happened to work out this way," I said, impressed in spite of my dour mood at what had happened to the grove. Once little more than branches and pale green leaves, the trees had exploded all over into brilliant, multicolored flowers.

"I'm glad they did," Tawni said, taking my arm. "I was sorry to see you go."

"I was sorry to leave," I said, covering her hand with my own and feeling what was left of my resolve weakening again. Tawni was only my age, eighteen years old — surely she wasn't this accomplished a liar already. Besides, she was only an apprentice calix artisan. It would make sense for her leaders to hide the deeper secrets of their agenda from her until they'd confirmed both her skill and her dedication.

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A small part of my mind told me that was rationalization. But suddenly I didn't really care. Tawni was there beside me, warm and affectionate, and there was simply no way I could believe she was my enemy. Whatever the Kailth had programmed the calix to do to me, I knew she would stand beside me in fighting it.

And if I lost that fight, that same small part reminded me soberly, at least Convocant Devaro would have the final data he wanted.

Speaking of Devaro, it was time I got down to the task he'd sent me here to do. "As a matter of fact," I said, "it was your parting gift that's responsible for me being back so soon."

"Then I am even more pleased I gave it to you," she said cheerfully. "How did this happen?"

"Well, of course I showed it to everyone in my office and around the Convocation," I said, a fresh twinge of guilt poking at me. I'd convinced myself that Tawni was on my side; and now here I was, lying to her. "They all thought it was beautiful, of course."

"I am honored."

"Anyway, some of them wanted to know how they could get one for themselves," I pushed ahead. "One of them — Convocant Devaro — asked me to come back and see if they were for sale."

"I am certain that can be arranged," Tawni said, turning us onto another path that led deeper into the grove. "Come, we will ask permission."

"Permission?" I asked, frowning, as she led us around a particularly bushy tree. "Who in here do we need to ask — ?"

I broke off, my breath catching in my throat as we stepped into a small clearing. In the center was a small cookstove, with something flat and gray sizzling on the grillwork at its top. Arranged in a neat circle around it were a half dozen sleepbags, with antenna-like posts sticking out of the ground beside each one.

And standing in a line between the ring of sleepbags and the cookstove, facing our direction, were six Kailth warriors.

I froze. It was probably the worst, most guilty-looking thing I could have done, but I couldn't help it. I froze right there to the spot, Tawni's grip on my arm bringing her up short as well. She blinked at me, obviously bewildered by my reaction, and tried to pull me forward —

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"You," one of the Kailth said. "Human male. Come."

I wanted to run. Desperately. To run back to the half-wing and get the hell out of there.

But they were all wearing those lumpy sidearms, the ones that could bring down a two-story building with one shot. So instead I let Tawni pull me across the clearing to them.

"What do you wish here?" the warrior demanded when I was standing right in front of him.

"He is my friend, Warrior-Citizen-One," Tawni said. "He would like to purchase some of our calices."

There was a long moment of silence. "You were on Quibsh before," the warrior said at last. "You are a clerk to Convocant Magnell Sutherlan."

"Yes, that's right," I managed. "I mean, I was. I'm working for Convocant Lantis Devaro now."

"Why do you clerk now for Convocant Lantis Devaro?"

"He hired me away from Convocant Sutherlan." I had a flash of inspiration — "He was the only Convocant who was really interested in finding out more about Tawni's people. Since I'd met them, he thought I could be of help."

There was another silence. I felt the sweat collecting on my forehead, wondering if the Kailth was suspicious or merely having difficulty sorting through the Anglish. "Were you?" he asked.

Was I helpful? What exactly did he mean by that? "I tried to be," I stammered. "I — he did send me back here to see them."

"And to purchase their calices."

"Yes," I said, bracing myself. This was going to be risky, but it might just add the necessary bit of verisimilitude to my story. "He was very upset when I refused to sell him the one Tawni gave me," I told him. "I told him it was a gift, and that I wouldn't give it up under any circumstances."

The warrior eyed me, and I held my breath. If the possessiveness I really did feel for Tawni's calix was part of its programming, then the Kailth should conclude that it was doing its job and let me go about my business.

And apparently, it worked. "How many calices does Convocant Devaro wish to purchase?" the warrior asked.

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I started breathing again. "He would like to buy three or four," I said. "Though that would depend on the price — he only gave me twenty thousand to spend. He wants to give them as gifts."

The warrior turned to his comrades and said something in the Kailth language. One of them answered, and for a moment they conversed back and forth. Then the first warrior turned back to face me. "He may have three," he announced. "They shall be gifts, without payment required."

Gifts. At least, I thought, the Kailth had the class not to require the UnEthHu to pay for its own destruction. "Thank you," I said. "You are most generous."

"The generosity is not for you," the warrior said. "Nor for Convocant Devaro. It is for this citizen-three who calls you friend."

It was a line, of course, something to ally any suspicions I might have about getting such valuable artwork for free. But just the same, it dug another sharp edge of guilt into me. Tawni had indeed called me a friend to her overlords, and here I was using her against them.

But then, the Kailth were using me as a pawn, too. It all came out even. Maybe.

Tawni bowed to them. "I am honored, Warrior-Citizen-One," she said. "Thank you."

"It is our pleasure," the warrior said. "You may take the human male to where he may choose."

She bowed again and pulled gently on my arm, and together we turned away and left the clearing. It wasn't until we were out of the grove and heading up the slope of the volcano that she spoke. "You still think ill of the Kailthaermil," she said quietly.

My first impulse was to deny it. But I'd done enough lying for one day. "I don't trust them, Tawni," I told her. "They're conquerors. Who's to say they aren't going to take a shot at the UnEthHu next?"

"But you are not like the others they have fought against," Tawni said. "You do not enslave other peoples, nor do you seek to impose your will on them."

That was true enough, I supposed. Preoccupied with our own internal squabblings, the UnEthHu generally ignored the alien races we came across except to get them involved in the arcane labyrinth of our commerce and industry. "You weren't bothering anyone on Sagtt'a, either," I

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pointed out. "Yet you now have Kailth war platforms orbiting overhead."

"That is not the same," she insisted, shaking her head in exasperation. "The stations are there for our protection." She made a clicking sound in her throat. "You choose not to see. But someday you will. Someday the Kailthaermil will prove their true intentions."

"Yes," I murmured. "I'm sure they will. Tell me, what were those warriors doing in the grove?"

"They have brought a new shipment to us," Tawni said, still sounding a little cross with me. "They will stay another few days before departing, and prefer to sleep outdoors."

Bivouac practice? "Why in the grove?"

She shrugged. "I am told they enjoy the scent of the flowers."

I stared at her. "You're kidding."

"Why should I be?" she countered, throwing a puzzled look up at me. "Can Kailthaermil not enjoy the small things of life as well as you or I?"

"I suppose so," I conceded. "It's just not something I would have pictured warriors doing."

"The Kailthaermil are not like other warriors," Tawni said. "Someday you will see."

We reached the volcano and went in through the crack in the cone...and for the second time that day I found myself stopping short in shock. There on the wall shelves, where a few weeks ago there had been only eight calices, were now nearly fifty of the sculptures. "Tawni — those calices," I said stupidly, pointing at them. "Where did they come from?"

"That is what the Kailthaermil brought," she said, as if it was obvious. "They believe this volcano to have unusually good curing characteristics. They have decided to test this by bringing calices here from other artisan colonies."

"I see," I said, getting my feet moving again. "You've never told me how long the curing process takes."

"They will cure for fifteen days," she said. "When they are done, the Kailthaermil will bring more in. They say the complete test will require a hundred days and three hundred calices."

"I see," I said, gazing uneasily at the glittering sculptures. Three hundred calices, suddenly and conveniently moved here to a minor border world.

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A border world which the Dynad and Convocation just happened to be paying virtually no attention to. Coincidence? Or could the Kailth plan be further along than Devaro realized?

"Will you choose your three calices now?" Tawni asked as I hesitated. "Or shall we spend a pleasant evening together first, and a night of sleep with the others, and you may choose in the morning?"

With an effort, I shook off the sense of dread. If the Kailth were planning these calices for a prelude to invasion...

But what difference could a single night make? Besides, it occurred to me that if Devaro proved the calices were weapons, this would likely be my last trip back here.

My last chance to spend time with Tawni.

"Morning will be soon enough," I told her, turning us around again. "Let's go back."

IN THE MORNING I selected my three calices, wearing gloves while handling them as Devaro had instructed, and in a flurry of good-byes and farewell hugs I left Quibsh.

Devaro was grimly pleased with my report and his new prizes. "Three hundred of them, you say," he commented, gazing at the three calices lined up on his desk. "Interesting. Did any of the other verlorens seem upset that Tawnikakalina told you about that?"

"I didn't hear her mention it to anyone," I said. "I know I didn't say anything. But don't forget the Kailth themselves sent me to the volcano to pick out your gifts."

"Waving the red flag under our noses," Devaro grunted, running a gloved finger thoughtfully along one of the metal strands in the middle calix. "Or else Tawnikakalina and the Kailth both assumed you were sufficiently under your own calix's influence that they could do or say anything in your presence without you noticing."

I shifted my shoulders uncomfortably beneath my jacket. In Tawni's presence I couldn't think of her as a threat. In Devaro's, I couldn't seem to think of her as anything but. "Could they have been right?" I asked. "Could the calix have made me forget something significant."

"If so, it won't be forgotten for long," Devaro said. "I've scheduled you

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for another brainscan for tomorrow morning. If there are any suppressed memories from the trip, they'll dig them out."

"A brainscan can do that?" I asked, frowning uneasily. That wasn't what they'd told us about brainscans in Institute bio class.

"Of course," Devaro said. "We can pull out strong or recent memories, personality tendencies — everything that makes you who you are. That's why it's called *complete*." He lifted an eyebrow sardonically. "Why, is there something about this last trip to Quibsh you don't want me knowing about?"

"Well, no, of course not," I said, suddenly feeling even more uncomfortable. My conversations with Tawni — and the more private times with her — all of that was going to be accessible to them? "It's just that — I mean — "

"This is war, Markand," he said coldly, cutting off my fumbling protest. "Or it will be soon enough. I don't know what you did with Tawnikakalina out there, and I don't especially care. All that matters is the defense of the UnEthHu."

"I understand, sir," I said, feeling abashed. "And I didn't do anything with her. What I mean is — "

"That's all for now," he cut me off again. "Be in the examination room at seven o'clock tomorrow morning, ready to go."

And I was dismissed. "Yes, sir," I murmured.

He was gazing thoughtfully at the three calices as I left the room.

The brainscan the next morning was just as unpleasant as the first one had been. So was the next one, a week later, and the one the week after that.

Devaro had me into his office after each test to talk about the results. But as I think back on those conversations, I realize that he never really told me very much about what the doctors had learned. Nor did he say anything about the parallel tests they were performing on my calix. I assumed they were taking more of the five-micron core samples he'd mentioned, but I wasn't able to see any marks on the calix and he never actually said for sure.

Gradually, my life settled into a steady if somewhat monotonous routine. I worked in Devaro's outer office during the day, sifting reports

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and compiling data for him like the junior aide that I was. Evenings were spent alone at my apartment, giving myself over to the calix and letting it do whatever it was doing to me. Oddly enough, though I'd expected to feel a certain trepidation as I handled the sculpture, that didn't happen. It still soothed me when I was tense or depressed, invigorated me when I felt listless, and generally felt more like a friend than anyone I'd yet come across in Zurich.

And late at night, in bed, I would gaze at the lights flickering across the ceiling and think about Tawni and her village. Wondering endlessly how such an open and friendly people could be doing all this.

But there was never any answer. And the night after my sixth brainscan I finally realized that there never would be. Not as long as I was trying to solve the puzzle with my own limited knowledge and experience. What I needed was more information, or a fresh perspective.

And once I realized that, I knew there was only one place I could go.

I called Devaro's chief of staff the next morning and, pleading illness, arranged to take two days off. An hour after that, I was on the magtrans heading south.

And three hours after that I was walking into the *Ponte Empyreal* in Rome. The heart, soul, and organizational center of the Church.

They left me waiting in an anteroom of the inner sanctorum while word of my errand was taken inside. I sat there for nearly an hour, wondering if they were ignoring me or just drawing lots among the junior clerics to see which of them would have to come out and talk to me.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

"You must be Mr. Markand," the elderly, white-cloaked man said as he stepped briskly through an archway into the anteroom. "I'm sorry about the delay, but I was in conference and I've just now been told you were here."

"Oh, no problem, your Ministri, no problem," I said, scrambling to my feet and trying not to stutter. Some junior cleric, I'd been cynically expecting; but this was the man himself. First Ministri Jorgen Goribeldi, supreme head of the Church. "I've been perfectly fine here."

"Good," he said smiling easily as he waved me toward the hallway he'd emerged from. It was, I realized with some embarrassment, a reaction

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he was probably used to. "Come this way, please, and tell me what I can do for you."

"I should first apologize for the intrusion, your Ministri," I said as we set off together down the hallway. "I wasn't expecting them to bother you personally with this."

"That's quite all right," Goribeldi assured me. "I like meeting with people — it's too easy to get out of touch in here." He shrugged, a slight movement of his white cloak. "Besides, I'm one of the few people in the *Ponte Empyreal* at the moment who can help you with your questions about the Sagtt'a colony."

"Yes, sir," I said, feeling my heartbeat pick up. "Am I right, then, in assuming that the Church did indeed send a delegation there?"

"Certainly," he nodded. "At the direct invitation of the Kailth, I might add. They had noted the Church's passion for the well-being of humanity, and wanted to demonstrate their good-will by letting us visit the humans living under their dominion. We found no evidence of cruelty or oppression, by the way."

"Yes, I've talked to some of them," I agreed. "They seem to think of the Kailth as liberators."

"Apparently with a great deal of validity. So what exactly do you wish to know?"

"It's a little hard to put into words," I said hesitantly. "I guess my question boils down to whether they could be so deeply under Kailth influence that they could appear open and honest to other people while at the same time actually being engaged in a kind of subversive warfare."

"In theory, of course they could," Goribeldi said. "Humanity has a tremendous capacity for rationalization and justification when it comes to doing evil against our brothers and sisters. They would hardly need to be under Kailth influence to do that. Or the influence of propagandists, megalomaniacal leaders, or Satan himself. It's a part of our fallen nature."

I nodded. "I see."

We had reached the end of the hallway now and a doorway flanked by a pair of brightly clad ceremonial guards. "But in this specific case," Goribeldi continued, pausing outside the door, "I would say any such worries are probably unfounded. Our delegation found the Sagtt'an

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society to be a strongly moral one, with a long tradition of ethical behavior. I'm sure they still have their share of people who can lie or steal with a straight face; but as a group, no, I don't think they could say one thing and do another. Not without it being obvious."

"All right," I said slowly. "But couldn't the group on Quibsh have been hand-picked by the Kailth for just that ability? Especially if it was drummed into them that the UnEthHu was their enemy?"

"I suppose that's possible," Goribeldi conceded, nodding to the guards. One of them reached over and released the old-fashioned latch, pushing the door open in front of us. "But I would still think it unlikely. Why don't you come in and I'll show you some of the relevant portions of the priestians' report."

We stepped together through the doorway. Goribeldi's private office, apparently, if the comfortably lived-in clutter was an indication. In the center of the room was a small conversation circle of silkhide-covered chairs and couches, to the right a programmable TV transceiver console, and to the left, beneath a wall of privacy-glazed windows, a large desk.

And sitting prominently on a corner of that desk was a calix.

I stopped short, my heart freezing inside me. "No," I whispered involuntarily.

"What is it?" Goribeldi asked, frowning at me.

I threw a quick glance at him, threw another out the door at my only escape route. But it was already too late. At my reaction the guards had suddenly stopped being ceremonial and were eying me like a pair of tigers already coiled to spring.

It was over. All over. And I had lost. The Kailth had gotten to First Ministri Goribeldi...and whatever the calix was supposed to do to him had surely already been accomplished.

And knowing my suspicions about them, he certainly couldn't allow me to live. I would just disappear from the *Ponte Empyreal*, with no one ever knowing what had happened.

Goribeldi was still frowning at me. "The calix," I said, with the strange calmness of someone who has nothing left to lose. "A gift from the Sagtt'ans?"

"No," he said. "From your superior."

I blinked at him. "My superior? You mean...Convocant Devaro?"

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"Yes, of course," he said, frowning a little harder. "He sent it here — oh, four or five weeks ago. A thank-you gift for my sending him a revised copy of our Sagtt'a report. Why, is there a problem?"

I looked at him, and the guards, and the calix. Then, as if moving in a dream, I walked over to the desk. Devaro had ordered me not to touch any of the three new calices on my way back from Quibsh, and I hadn't. But I'd had four days to study them en route, and I had.

Goribeldi was right. This was indeed one of them.

I turned back to face him, feeling vaguely light-headed. "But why?" I asked. "Why would he do this? It's a weapon."

Goribeldi shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I don't follow you."

"A weapon," I repeated. "It's programmed — programmed by touch. Whenever you hold it, it starts affecting you. It turns you from human into something else."

The guards took a step toward me. "Sir?" one of them murmured.

"No, no, it's all right," Goribeldi said, waving them back. "I'm not sure how you came to that conclusion, Mr. Markand, but you have it precisely backwards. The calix doesn't affect you. *You* affect *it*."

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"It's your presence that changes the calix, not the other way around," he said. "Your touch and voice affect the wood and crystal, altering the sculpture into a sort of echo of your own personality. A beautifully unique art form, far more individual than anything else you could possibly — "

"Wait a minute," I interrupted him, fighting hard to keep my balance as the universe seemed to tilt sideways beneath me. "You know this for a fact? I mean, it's been proven?"

"Of course," Goribeldi said. "The scientists in our delegation studied it thoroughly. In fact, 'calix' was actually the priestians' name for it, coming from an old term for the Cup of Communion. Holding a reflection of your soul, as it were. I hadn't realized the Sagtt'ans had picked up on the name."

I looked back at the calix. "I'm sorry, your Ministri," I said, my face warm with a thoroughly unpleasant mixture of embarrassment and confusion. "I guess I — " I broke off, shaking my head. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Goribeldi said, waving the guards back to their posts. Apparently, he'd decided I wasn't crazy. Me, I wasn't so sure. "Come, let me show you the priestians' report."

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I still wasn't sure half an hour later when he escorted me back to the anteroom and thanked me for coming. One thing I was sure of, though: the calices did indeed seem to behave exactly as he had said they did.

Which meant they weren't the weapons that Convocant Devaro had thought they were. Surely if he'd read the Church's report he already knew that.

But he'd had that report at least a month ago. If he had read it, why was he still subjecting me to weekly brainscans?

Unless he still wasn't convinced the calices were harmless. But in that case, why would he risk giving a potentially dangerous weapon to First Ministri Goribeldi?

I puzzled over it as I headed down the street toward the magtrans station. I was still puzzling, in fact, right up to the point where the two large men came up on either side of me and effortlessly stuffed me into a waiting car. There was the tingle of a stunner at my side, and the world went dark.

I AWOKE ABOARD a half-wing already driving through space. The two men who'd kidnapped me were aboard as well, the three of us apparently the only passengers. As jailers they initially seemed rather amateurish; aside from the control areas and their two cabins I had complete freedom of the ship. But after two days of searching for weapons or escape routes or even information, I came to realize they weren't so much amateurish as just casually efficient. They completely ignored my questions and occasional frustrated demands, and only spoke to each other in clipped sentences of a language I didn't recognize.

Finally, after three days of flight, we came alongside an unmarked military-style full-wing floating in space. A transfer tunnel was set up and I was sent through, where I was met by a pair of hard-faced men in SkyForce uniforms. No chattier than my jailers had been, they escorted me silently to the command observation balcony above and behind the bridge.

Waiting for me there, as I'd rather expected, was Convocant Devaro.

"So," he said without preamble. "Here you are."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Here we both are."

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For a moment he studied my face. "You've figured it out, haven't you?" he said at last. "Something the priestians at the *Ponte Empyreal* said to you."

I looked past his shoulder through the balcony's twin-sectioned canopy. Directly ahead, the view over the bow of the full-wing showed that we were coming in toward a planetary darkside; ahead and below, I could see down into the bridge and the SkyForce officers and crewmen at their stations. "I saw the calix you gave to First Ministri Goribeldi," I said. "He told me it wasn't a weapon." I looked back at Devaro. "He was wrong, wasn't he."

Devaro shrugged. "'Weapon' is an unfairly loaded term," he said. "I prefer to think of it as a tool."

"A tool which you're using to invade other people's privacy," I accused him. "Giving someone a calix is really no different than doing a brainscan on him. Except that he doesn't know it's been done. All you have to do is give the wood fibers enough time to adapt to his personality, then take your five-micron core samples and read his personality matrix right off them."

Devaro laughed, a short animal-like bark. "You make it sound so easy. You have no idea how much time and sweat went into developing the proper chemo-mathematical transforms to use."

"I think I have some idea," I said stiffly. "After all, I was your guinea pig in the whole thing. If you hadn't had my weekly brainscans to compare with the calix's chemical changes you'd never have been able to work out your precious transforms."

He shrugged carelessly. "Oh, we'd have managed. It just would have taken longer, and required us to get hold of a calix on our own. Your providential return from Quibsh merely made it simpler."

"Well, enjoy it while you can," I bit out. "When we get back to Earth, I'll see you in prison."

He lifted his eyebrows. "On what grounds? You signed a legal authorization before each of those brainscans."

"What about the calix you gave First Ministri Goribeldi?" I countered.

"A thank-you gift. Perfectly legal."

"Except when the gift's part of an illegal brainscan."

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"What illegal brainscan?" Devaro countered calmly. "A brainscan is performed with a Politayne-Chu neural mapmaker or the equivalent. There's no such device in a calix."

"You're splitting hairs."

"I'm staying precisely within the letter of the law," Devaro corrected. "That's all that counts."

I glared at him. But even as I did so, I could feel my position eroding out from under my feet like loose sand. I had no idea how the brainscan laws were worded, but I had no doubt that Devaro had studied them thoroughly. "So where within the letter of the law does destruction of the Church come?" I demanded. "I presume you *are* planning its destruction?"

"Eventually," Devaro said off-handedly. "But that's a long way in the future. There are other more urgent matters that need to be attended to first."

"Such as?"

"Such as the threat posed to the UnEthHu by the Kailthaermil Empire," he said, his voice suddenly hard. "And our moral responsibility to protect fellow human beings wherever they might be found."

I blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"Your verlorens, of course," he said. "Conquered and enslaved by the Kailth, along with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other races. The UnEthHu has stood by idly for ten years now. It's time we took a stand against such tyranny."

I glanced at the dark planetary surface now rolling by beneath us, an equally dark suspicion digging into my stomach. "This is Quibsh, isn't it?" I said. "You're going to attack Quibsh."

"We're not *attacking* anyone," Devaro said. "We're liberating a human colony from alien overlords."

"And while you're liberating them, you'll also liberate their collection of calices?"

"The calices are evidence of their enslavement," Devaro said evenly. "Fabulous works of art, routinely and ruthlessly stolen from them by their alien overlords."

"Which you'll no doubt be giving to other high-ranking UnEthHu and Church officials," I said, a bitter taste in my mouth. "And senior SkyForce officers — "

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I stopped short, suddenly remembering where we were. On an unmarked military full-wing with SkyForce personnel aboard..."You used a calix to blackmail the *SkyForce*?"

"Don't be absurd," Devaro sniffed. "A Supreme Convocant hardly needs to stoop to anything as crude as blackmail. Let's just say that when I presented my request to Admiral Gates, I knew the right words to use to persuade him to my point of view."

"Yes, I suppose you did," I said, thinking back over all the conversations I'd had with Devaro during the past few weeks. How he had always somehow managed to say just the right things to keep my suspicions of Tawni alive, even against the evidence of my own eyes and heart. At times, usually late at night, I'd wondered at my inability to make my own decisions and stick to them. Now, too late, I understood what he'd done to me.

The intercom twittered. "We're approaching the target site, Convocant," a voice said.

"I'll be right there," Devaro said. "You're welcome to stay here," he added to me as he stepped over to the lift plate leading to the bridge below.

"This could start a war," I warned quietly. Trying, I suppose, one last time. "Are a few calices worth that much to you?"

"The calices are power," he said simply. "If you haven't already figured out what that means, you're either too naive or too stupid for me to explain it to you now." He shrugged. "Besides, I've already told you that war with the Kailth is inevitable. If it starts here, so be it."

He touched the control and dropped away through the floor. The opening sealed again, and I was alone.

I walked over to the canopy, a hundred painful thoughts and useless plans and bitter self-recriminations chasing themselves through my mind. Devaro was on the move, with his long sought-after seat on the Dynad in his sights. Only now he had a secret weapon that might just get it for him.

And I'd been the one who'd given it to him. That was what galled the most. Not only had my brainscans provided the key to his scheme, but I'd even trotted obediently out to Quibsh and gotten him the extra calices he wanted.

He'd used one of them to talk a SkyForce admiral out of a military full-wing and crew. Another was waiting like a hidden time bomb for an

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eventual attack against the unwanted moral criticisms of the Church. I was afraid to wonder whom he'd given the third one to.

I stepped up to the canopy. We were approaching the terminator now, the hazy line marking dawn on the planet below. Just into the lighted area I could see the familiar chain of volcanoes that bordered the little group of verloren villages.

A motion below me caught my attention, and I looked down into the bridge. Devaro and two of the officers were gazing to the right; even as I watched, one of them shoved the Convocant into one of the chairs. Frowning, wondering what they were looking at, I leaned my head against the canopy and peered in that direction —

And was slammed bodily against the curved plastic as the full-wing abruptly skidded into a hard right-hand turn.

I peeled myself off the canopy and dived toward one of the balcony's chairs, grabbing the safety straps and pulling myself into it. Ahead now I could see what had gotten everyone so riled up: a pair of aircraft heading our way. I tried to figure out if the direction was right for them to be coming from one of the Kailth bases, but I was so turned around now I didn't know which way was which. I threw another glance down at the bridge —

And flinched back as, at the edge of my vision, a burst of fire flashed out from the full-wing's bow.

I looked up again. The missile was heading straight toward the incoming aircraft, its drive blazing like a miniature sun against the lightening sky. I held my breath, thinking of those awesome Kailth weapons, and waited for the aircraft to return the fire.

But they didn't. Instead, they merely broke formation, veering off sharply to either side. The missile split in response, one half targeting each of them, and the race for survival was on. One of the aircraft vanished into the darkness behind us as our full-wing swung back around toward the terminator line ahead. The other aircraft was driving directly away from us toward the rising sun, the missile rapidly overtaking it. I scanned the ground ahead, trying to reorient myself —

And suddenly I jabbed at the chair's intercom switch. "Convocant Devaro! That aircraft — it's heading straight for the group of villages!"

The only verbal response was a curse; but abruptly the full-wing leaped forward, driving hard toward the doomed aircraft. A laser flashed

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out, sweeping dizzyingly as the gunner tried to lock onto the missile.

But it was too far away. And it was too late. The two exhausts coalesced into one; and with a surprisingly small flash of blue-white fire the aircraft disintegrated.

I watched helplessly, hands clenched around the safety straps. The full-wing, down to treetop level now, was driving swiftly toward the impact point. I could see a reddish glow ahead, mixing with the dawn light.

And suddenly we were there, swinging around again and sweeping over the area. I could see the string of villages now, with a scattering of burning debris from the aircraft strewn around and among the buildings.

But that wasn't where the red glow I'd seen was coming from. The main body of the aircraft had slammed into the cone of the nearest volcano, and just below the point of impact a new lava vent had opened up.

I reached for the intercom again, but Devaro beat me to it. "Markand, is that the volcano where they keep the calices?" he snapped.

"Yes," I confirmed. "That lava flow — it's headed toward Tawni's village — "

The intercom cut off. But I didn't need to hear Devaro's instructions to the captain to know what he was going to do next. The aircraft's crash had clearly shaken up the whole unstable region; plumes of smoke were beginning to appear from several of the other nearby volcanoes. If Devaro wanted the calices, he would have to get them now.

Even if it meant abandoning Tawni and her people to burn.

The full-wing was coming around back toward the volcano as I threw the bright red lever that opened the balcony's emergency drop-tube door. I dove inside, spun around and hit the "eject" plate. The door closed, the stasis webbing wrapped around me, and with a stomach-churning lurch I dropped free.

Ten seconds later I was down, the tube toppling delicately onto its side and popping open. I scrambled to my feet and looked around, trying to figure out where exactly I was. I couldn't see the light from the lava flow, but the wind was acrid with the smell of burning vegetation, so I knew it had to be somewhere close. A three-meter-high ridge of basalt cut across in front of me; unmindful of what the sharp rock might do to my

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hands, I slung the tube's survival pack over one shoulder and scrambled my way to the top.

There, no more than a hundred meters away was the lava flow, making its slow but inexorable way down toward the sleeping villages below. At the top of the cone, its edges glowing a fiery red with reflected light, the full-wing was easing downward. Devaro, apparently unwilling to waste even a second, was taking the entire ship into the crater.

And then, even as I watched, a second source of light suddenly flickered from the full-wing's edges. A glow coming from inside the crater itself.

The volcano was getting ready to erupt.

"Get out of there," I whispered urgently to them, squeezing hard onto the basalt. Fumes were beginning to rise, and the glow was growing brighter. If they didn't leave right now...

But they didn't. The full-wing continued down, its dark shape disappearing below the rim of the crater. I held my breath, for some perverse reason counting the seconds.

And as I reached eleven, it happened. Abruptly, the crater belched out a huge plume of smoke and ash and red fire, lighting up the ground even as it darkened the sky. Three seconds later it was eclipsed by a second burst of flame, this one the clean and brilliant blue-white of the full-wing's missiles exploding.

My stomach wanted desperately to be sick. But there was no time for that now. That first lava flow was still headed toward Tawni's village, and they were going to need all the help they could get if they were to evacuate in time. Easing my legs over the ridge, I braced myself to jump.

And paused, as something near the leading edge of the lava flow caught my eye. Someone or something was moving down there among the burning vegetation. I squinted, fumbling in the survival pack for a set of binoculars —

And nearly fell off the ridge as the front of the lava flow erupted in a flash of green flame.

I fought for balance as a second flash followed the first, a fresh surge of horror stabbing into me. That was the flash of a Kailth hand weapon.

And there were only two reasons I could think of why anyone might be firing into the gloom down there. Either he was shooting at another

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survivor from the full-wing, or else he thought that was where I'd gone down.

My hand had been hunting in the survival pack for a set of binoculars. Now, it moved instead to the butt of a SkyForce-issue 12mm pistol. Gripping it tightly, I swung my legs back to the far side of the ridge again —

And found myself looking down into the face of a Kailth warrior.

If I'd taken even half a second to think about it I would have realized how stupidly suicidal the whole idea was. But I didn't take that half second. I hauled the 12mm out of the pack, flicked off the safety, and fired.

The weapon boomed, the recoil again nearly knocking me off the ridge. But the Kailth was no longer there. Without any preparatory movement whatsoever he had effortlessly leaped up to straddle the ridge beside me. Even as I tried desperately to swing the pistol around toward him, he reached across my chest and plucked it from my hand. "Human male," he said. "Come."

"Come where?" I asked, my voice trembling with reaction. "Why?"

The bumblebee face regarded me. "That you may understand."

THERE WERE TWO other Kailth warriors standing by the lava flow when we arrived. Two Kailth, and Tawni.

"Stane!" she burst out, running to my arms as soon as she saw me. "Oh, thank the God of Mercy — you are all right. You are all right."

I looked past her at the two Kailth, finally seeing what all the shooting was about. With those awesome handguns they were blasting a trench in the hard igneous rock of the volcano cone, diverting the slow-moving lava away from the villages below. "Yes, I'm safe," I murmured, holding Tawni close. "For now."

"For always," she insisted, drawing back to look into my face. "They have promised me your safety."

"Have they really." I looked at the warrior standing silently beside us and nodded toward the two Kailth digging the trench. "Is this what I need to understand?"

The Kailth stirred. "You must understand all that has happened."

I snorted. "Oh, I understand. All of it."

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"Tell me," he challenged.

I glared at him, knowing that it was over. But at least before I died Tawni would get to see what her adored liberators really were. "You used me," I said. "You got Tawni to give me a calix to take back to the UnEthHu. Which you've now used to kill Convocant Devaro and everyone aboard that full-wing."

"We regret the loss of the other humans," the alien said. "As we also regret the loss of the Kailthaermil warriors aboard the flyers which were destroyed. But their deaths were of Convocant Devaro's devising, not ours."

"How can you say that?" I demanded. "If I hadn't taken that calix back with me, none of this would have happened."

There was a soft hissing sound. "You do not yet understand, Stane Markand," the Kailth said. "If not for the calix, it would indeed not have happened this way. But it would still have happened."

I shook my head, my brief flash of defiance draining away. "You're not making any sense," I said with a sigh. "It was the calix that brought Convocant Devaro here."

"No," the Kailth said firmly. "It was Convocant Devaro's desire for power over others that brought him. The calix did nothing but bring that desire into focus."

"You did not seek to use my gift for such purposes," Tawni added earnestly. "For you it was a joy, and a blessing. It was only Convocant Devaro who sought to use it for his own gain."

I gazed back at her face. "So you knew all along," I said. "From the beginning I was nothing but a pawn in this."

Her mouth twitched as if I'd raised a hand to her. But she held my gaze without flinching. "I gave you a gift from my heart," she said. "For friendship. It was not part of any plan."

"The Citizen-Three is correct," the warrior said. "Our plan was to begin there." He pointed up at the bubbling fire of the volcano. "Tawnikakalina's gift was indeed only a gift." He regarded me thoughtfully. "If you were no more than a pawn, we would not tell you this."

"So why *are* you telling me?" I countered. "What do you want from me?"

"I have said already," the Kailth said. "Understanding." He reached out an armored hand to touch Tawni's shoulder. "There is ambition that

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drives one to be the best one can be," he said. "That is the ambition Tawnikakalina has for her art. Perhaps you have such ambition as well."

He lowered his hand. "But there is also ambition that seeks power over others, and does not care what destruction is left in its wake. We have seen this cruel madness in the Phashiskar, and the Baal'ariai, and the Aoeemme. And we see it now in the humans.

"And when such ambition threatens the Kailthaermil, we must offer it the means to destroy itself."

I looked over at the other warriors still cutting their trench. "Convocant Devaro said war with you is inevitable. Is that what you mean?"

"No," the Kailth said. "We have no desire for war with the UnEthHu. You do not subjugate the other beings within your boundaries, but treat them with justice. Nor are there fundamental human interests or needs which demand conflict with the Kailthaermil. War will come only if individual humans choose to create it for their own purposes."

I glanced up at the volcano. "Men like Devaro."

Tawni's grip tightened on my arm. "I do not wish war with your people, Stane," she said quietly.

"I don't want it either, Tawni," I said, looking at the Kailth warrior again. "But it seems to me that the war may have already begun. Whether or not Devaro did this of his own free will, the fact remains that it was the Kailth who provided the calix that tempted him down that path."

"You are correct," the Kailth said. "The war has indeed begun."

Reaching into his armor, he pulled out the pistol he'd taken from me. I caught my breath, feeling Tawni shrink against my side. "But it is not a war against humans," the Kailth continued. "It is a war against meaningless and unnecessary war."

He held up the pistol. "This is such a war, Stane Markand, the war Convocant Devaro sought to create against the Kailthaermil Empire for his own purposes. It may be stopped thus — "

He grasped the barrel with his other hand, and with a sharp crack of broken gunplastic snapped the weapon in half. A squeeze with the armored hand, and the barrel shattered into splinters.

"Or it may be stopped thus." Reaching into the shattered frame with two fingers, he gave a sharp tug and pulled out the firing pin. "It is a war that must be fought, or many innocent lives will be lost," he said quietly,

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handing me the pin and what was left of the ruined gun. "Which way would you choose for us to fight it?"

I looked at Tawni. She was gazing back up at me, the skin of her face tight with quiet anxiety. Waiting to see how I would react to all this.

Perhaps waiting to see if she had lost a friend.

"What about Tawni's people?" I asked the Kailth. "Devaro gave his calices away to others. If any of them tries to use them the same way he wanted to, they may come here to get more."

"The Kailthaermil freed us when we had no hope," Tawni said quietly. "To help them free others, we willingly accept the danger."

"Perhaps," the Kailth said, "you can help make them safer."

I looked down the slope, toward the villages below. "Yes," I said. "Perhaps I can."

And with a lot of help, I did. Ten months later, in a precedent-shattering treaty, Quibsh became joint colonial territory of the Kailth and UnEthHu. Three years after that, convention was again shattered as the humans of Quibsh and Sagtt'a were granted full joint citizenship between the two races. Over those three years, six SkyForce officers and five more Convocants figured out Devaro's brainscan trick and attempted to use the calices to amass power. All of them either died in the attempt or were politically destroyed.

And in the midst of it all, in the greatest miracle of all, Tawni became my wife. And later, of course, your mother.

And so, as we stand here on the eve of the Fifth Joint Kailthaermil-UnEthHu Expedition into the unknown areas of the galaxy, I wanted you to know how my Year of YouthJourneying came out. It was the year I learned about politics and war, about ambition and selflessness, about art and death and love.

The year I grew up.

Our hopes and blessings go with you, my son, as you leave with the expedition tomorrow. May your nineteenth year be as blessed as mine.

With love, Dad.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE AN EXPERIMENT for you in our April issue. We know, we know, we've informally established June as the experiment issue, but this year, June will mark the beginning of something else entirely. So we must experiment in April.

In late 1995, we received a lovely cover painting from **Barclay Shaw**. The painting depicts a mermaid swimming around a man in an old-fashioned bubble helmet. The painting is stunning and wonderful, and did not illustrate any story in our inventory.

So...instead of having an artist illustrate a story, we decided to have a writer write a story around a painting. Not that unusual, we know, so we upped the stakes, and had *three* writers come up with three separate stories about this painting. We chose the writers: **Mike Resnick**, **Esther Friesner**, and **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**. They were chosen for their talent, their distinctive voices, and their willingness to try anything once.

After they agreed to the assignment, the three met at the Nebula banquet last spring and worked things out among themselves. Esther, they decided, would write the science fiction story. Mike would write the fantasy, and Nina would write the horror.

And so they did.

The stories are in hand, and are delightful. They are also extremely different from each other. The experiment worked — and now we want to share it with you. April and mermaids. What could be better?

Of course, April will have non-mermaid stories as well. It will also feature our usual columnists. And in future issues watch for stories by **Jack McDevitt**, **Ron Goulart**, **Lisa Goldstein**, and dozens of others. So keep your subscription current.

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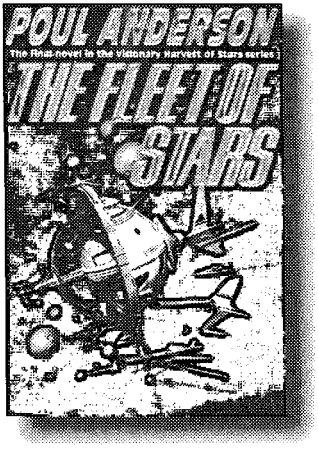

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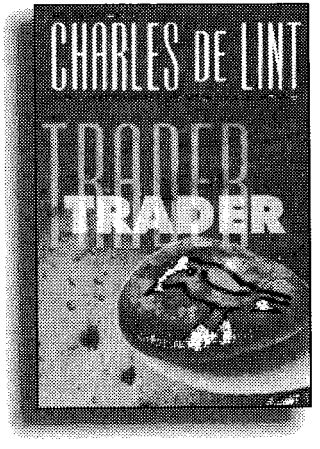

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